Ajax - a study of the impact and reception of the myth of Ajax and Sophocles' Ajax in Western culture

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AJAX - A STUDY OF THE IMPACT AND RECEPTION OF THE MYTH OF AJAX AND SOPHOCLES' *AJAX* IN WESTERN CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation focuses on the figure of the mythical Ajax as portrayed in Sophocles' eponymous drama, in particular the suicide motif, and reworkings of that play subsequently, with a particular focus on English-language performance. A primary focus will be psychological, in the broadest sense, which encompasses the depiction of male emotional suffering, male lamentation, the suicidal state and its implications, the aesthetic of performance as related to psychological states, and their reception. After the introductory chapter on reception, Chapter Two will study the pre-Sophoclean elements of the myth in order to assess Sophocles' modifications. Chapter Three will explore contemporary research into psychological states in suicide followed by a close examination of Sophocles' own play, and the manner in which he delineates the crisis that overwhelms his eponymous hero and the dramatic re-workings of the myth that enable him to convincingly portray that iconic suicide. Chapter Four forms a bridge by providing an overview of the reception of the play in later antiquity, including the treatment of the suicide motif in Virgil, the depictions of Ajax in pantomime and the use of the play in progymnasmata, and reception up to the seventeenth Century. Chapter Five begins with a short section on the choice of the play as the inaugural Cambridge Greek play in late nineteenth-century Cambridge, followed by a detailed study of a seminal—perhaps *the* seminal—twentieth century production, the *Ajax* written by Robert Auletta and directed by Peter Sellars, with its radical and innovative staging. The next two chapters explore a series of stagings of the play which have followed in the wake of that pathbreaking production, including Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Ajax* of 2013 with its focus on post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD, as well as the popularity of this play in staged readings with military veterans. A number of other notable productions of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries will also be explored in the final chapter. The thesis is however, more than a performance history of *Ajax* in a particular language and epoch, since it seeks to correlate the play's searching enquiry into why a great man kills himself with shifting and evolving theatrical, psychological and aesthetic sensibilities across time.

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This dissertation is dedicated to my mother Bina Chatterjee who supported my post-graduate ambitions from the start but sadly did not live to see its completion. Among all the other many helpful family, friends and colleagues, Jane Chee has been absolutely indispensable to making this happen.

Contents

Chapter 1

Introduction: Suicide in Sophocles

1.1 Death and Suicide in Sophocles

This thesis explores the emotional expression of the suicide motif in Sophocles' *Ajax* and its subsequent reception within the wider study of reception of this play generally. To my knowledge there has not been any study looking at this specific element in the plays of Sophocles; a significant omission given that suicide looms large in Sophocles compared to Aeschylus and Euripides: I count eight suicides in his seven extant plays, that is, Ajax, Jocasta, Antigone, Eurydice, Haemon, Oedipus, Deianeira, and Heracles. I include Oedipus and Heracles as they go willingly to their deaths at the end of *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Trachiniae* respectively. In contrast we have no suicides in Aeschylus, though the Suppliant Women in their name play threaten suicide and Aeschylus wrote a trilogy on the Ajax theme where the suicide of the hero is reported by a messenger. There are only four suicides in the eighteen extant plays by Euripides: Jocasta and Menoeceus in *Phoenician Women*, Phaedra in *Hipploytus*, and Evadne in *Suppliants*. To these we may consider adding Alcestis in her name play, since she chooses to die, and Macaria in *Children of Heracles*, while both Iphigeneia and Polyxena choose not to be constrained but go willingly to their sacrificial deaths in *Iphigeneia in Aulis* and *Hecuba* respectively. While the suicides in Sophocles are never gratuitous, since each is not only dramatic but essential for plot and character, they are nevertheless expressed with such penetrating psychology and poetic sensibility that they merit closer study. It is the particularly insistent focus on suicide in the *Ajax* that makes this play the centre of my thesis.

But first, if my approach is to be understood as it unfolds, I need to explain how I came to analyse the play and its reception from the perspective of Suicidology. This interdisciplinary perspective underlies my conviction that classical reception can help illuminate both the original artwork in the historical context of its original production and

the later cultural epochs in which it has been received. Thus *Ajax* can still enrich our understanding of suicidal individuals by illuminating the emotional and psychological processes accompanying the suicide crisis of the eponymous hero, and also that, conversely, suicide studies today can illuminate this momentous ancient tragedy.

1.2 A Personal Statement

I have come to this study of suicide in Sophocles' *Ajax* through personal experiences with distressed and suicidal callers over a twenty-four year period of being a volunteer with a crisis counselling service, where supporting the suicidal was the main focus.[1] Over time I acquired in-depth knowledge of the theories and research behind the emotional support of distressed and suicidal callers. Understanding the suicidal mind was vital, and distinguishing between what was and was not helpful was absolutely essential to the work of befriending.

Suicide is an extremely complex phenomenon, with multiple interlocking causes. Current explanations and treatments of suicide issue predominantly from a medical perspective, with mental disorders held to account for the majority of suicides. Within these models, socio-cultural factors also influence suicide rates—factors as varied as gender, age, religious faith, rates of alcoholism, and occupation, together with environmental factors such as the ease of access to means for suicide. While volunteers were educated on these factors, the focus was on understanding the typical crisis of the suicidal person in order to provide the emotional support best placed to help them.

Critical to this approach was understanding that often the suicidal crisis was temporary, and that the typical *psychological* states which accompany suicide would assist us in our interactions with suicidal callers. These states have been empirically

[1] The organizations in which I have been active are Befrienders Kuala Lumpur, where I served as a volunteer from 1988 to 2010, and the UK Samaritans, where I was a volunteer at the Central London branch from 2012 to 2014. These organizations are affiliated to each other and part of a worldwide movement.

studied by psychologists and sociologists over the past sixty years, leading to the development of the field of Suicidology. Edwin Shneidman,[2] a clinical psychologist who helped found Suicidology, isolated the following "commonalities" in the suicidal crises of individuals:[3]

1. The common stimulus or trigger is *unendurable pain*, physical and/or psychological, often expressed as "I am feeling choked up inside, cannot stand it any longer".
2. The common stressor is *frustration of psychological needs* whether through a crisis or loss, thwarted passion, bereavement – "I feel I want to scream, I'm very angry and can't get rid of it, I can't cope, I have had enough".
3. The common purpose of suicide is to seek a *solution* – "I am in an emotional trap, I must get out, suicide will solve everything, I cannot see any other way".
4. The common goal of suicide is a *cessation of consciousness* – to sleep, to stop the treadmill of racing thoughts, the pounding in the head, "the closing in on me".
5. The common emotion in suicide is *helplessness, hopelessness* – "There is nothing I can do, no one can help me, it is too late. I am a failure. I am so ashamed". There is a deep sense of isolation, loneliness, estrangement and meaninglessness.
6. The common internal attitude to suicide is *ambivalence* – "I want to live and I want to die, the battle goes on inside, I must kill myself but I could survive by accident."
7. The common cognitive or mental state in suicide is *constriction*, a sense of the walls closing in and the use of language that reflects this – "I feel *all* the barriers are up, *all* the avenues of escape are closed. There are *only* two answers – a miracle, or death – there will be *no* miracle, *nobody* can do any more, I think I am in a tunnel and there is no light at the end of it".

[2] Shneidman *The Suicidal Mind* 1998.
[3] The list is abridged from John Eldrid's *Caring for the Suicidal* 1988.

8. The common interpersonal act in suicide is *communication* – “It is all getting too much, they would be better off without me, sometimes I feel like ending it all, I have lost interest, feel very tired”.
9. The common action in suicide is *escape* – “I want to get out for good, I have had more than enough, this is the end, I cannot stand anymore, I am not going to put up with it”.
10. The common consistency in suicide is with lifelong *coping* patterns. Responses to stress and in crisis are generally consistent; personality and previous reactions in crisis play a part.

Trained in the knowledge and the typical signs of possible suicidal ideation, we volunteers were taught to engage with callers on the promise of confidentiality and anonymity. Always the focus was on the whole person, not the problem. Notwithstanding the particular issue affecting the caller, we would at some point gently engage them on whether they had suicidal thoughts and feelings. If they did, there were protocols on how to assist them. The crucial elements were non-judgmental acceptance, empathy, reflection of feelings and concerns, contained within a genuine desire to connect, to build a relationship of trust. For it is the quality of that relationship that may help to ameliorate some of the loneliness and isolation, reduce the despair and hopelessness, and often tide over the worst of the suicidal crisis.

Active listening and engagement, befriending the suicidal, is emotionally and physically demanding, and embarked upon only after training, coaching and supervised sessions, within the context of an organization where support is provided by other trained volunteers. The work is, however, deeply rewarding: it is incredibly humbling to be allowed into the psychic space of callers, to sit with them in the depths of their anguish, to hold them as it were while they expressed despair, failure, loss, and grief. It is a privilege to hear their deepest secrets, encounter their greatest fears, in the course of their

exploring the most profound questions of all: why live? What makes life worth living? Why go on having lost that which you believed was the most important value: your job, or partner, or child, or health, or future? Often, the deep sharing was enough to help them over the crisis; occasionally, there would be other sessions with other volunteers, or referrals to medical and psychiatric services where appropriate.

While problem-solving was eschewed, volunteers explored coping styles and tried to put things into perspective, all the while counting on the ambivalence we sensed, trying to draw out the hope within the caller, the hope that often inspired them to call the helpline in the first place.[4]

The second chapter of this thesis surveys the presentation of Ajax in sources prior to Sophocles' play, in order to try to identify what was new and distinctive about the suicide in this tragedy. But in the long third chapter, which forms the conceptual core of the thesis, I engage intensively with the actual text of Sophocles' tragedy, and the way Ajax interacts with those who try to befriend him. In the context of the contemporary studies on suicide in this chapter, I discuss the impact on suicide rates of volunteer befriending, especially preventive strategies. These include helplines, which form a small piece of a very large network of helping agents, all of which are needed to address the many-headed hydra that is suicide. Suicide's multiple dimensions need medical, pharmaceutical, therapeutic and policy interventions at the individual, group, community and national levels.

To return to my experience, my volunteer work was performed in parallel to a career in law and industry while at the same time I was developing and deepening a long-standing interest in classical antiquity. Befriending the suicidal and classical antiquity began to converge during a training session when a trainer proposed Philoctetes on his

[4] Chad Varah's *Befriending the Suicidal* (1985) is the key text behind the founding of Samaritans UK. Befrienders Kuala Lumpur developed independently but later became affiliated to Samaritans under the Befrienders Worldwide umbrella.

island as a prototype of the distressed caller: volunteer helpers, therapists, carers, are the strangers drawn by Philoctetes' cries of distress to sit with him in his isolation, pain and terror, unrepelled by the odour of his wound, the wound that is a source of that distress and isolation from the human community. After reading Sophocles' eponymous play, "sitting with Philoctetes" struck me as an apt metaphor for the helping relationship.

Reading Euripides' *Heracles*, I was amazed by the parallels between contemporary concepts of emotional support and the interaction between Heracles and Theseus. Above all, I was struck by Sophocles' *Ajax*: here was an incredibly realistic portrayal of suicide, and at the same time, a tour de force of dramatic tension. These two plays held out the promise that our understanding of the plays and of suicide could be mutually enriched by exploring the way that these ancient Greek texts frame the psychological sources of the suicidal crises and the potential for healing. In crucial ways, *Ajax* provided the closer sense of association with modernity and the greater psychological challenge: what would have been needed to prevent that suicide? What clues has Sophocles provided in his masterly depiction of this iconic suicide? How has the play been interpreted and how have its key messages been conveyed?

Such, therefore, has been the genesis of my interest in this drama and its reception and interpretation over time.

1.3 Research Questions

My central research question, then, is as follows: are the typical psychological and emotional states affecting the suicidal person, as identified in contemporary Suicidological theory and therapy, comparable to the portrayal of suicide in Sophocles' *Ajax*? Further sub-questions flow from this: what are the implications of this investigation for the understanding of suicide in antiquity? What are the performance implications of this understanding of suicide? Given the unparalleled intensity of the focus on suicide

within Ajax's tragedy, what are other ways in which this Sophoclean work has been interpreted and performed, why and for what purposes?

1.4 Plan of this thesis

In the remainder of this Chapter One, the Introduction, having set out my key research questions after a short personal statement of my interest in the question of suicide, I summarize briefly (1.5) the scholarship on emotions and their interpretation within classics, including the place of lament in tragedy. I follow this by a brief look (1.6) at the current scholarship on suicide in antiquity and how my approach differs from previous studies. Next (1.7) I study the depiction of suicides in Sophocles' other plays, in particular the treatment of empathy, and other psychological aspects that I will explore in relation to the *Ajax.* Finally (1.8) I glance at a number of key texts on major Athenian tragedies in the history of Performance Reception Studies and how they relate to my explorations.

Chapter Two examines the mythological sources and treatments of the Ajax theme prior to Sophocles and proposes that in all probability he altered the myth in ways that render the suicide crisis *psychologically* complete, while pushing the question of intent to the full.

In Chapter Three I summarize key research findings from contemporary scholarship on the suicidal mind. Then, in a close reading of the play, I compare the key research findings to Sophocles' depiction of the suicidal crisis as it unfolds and the psychological and emotional states expressed and suffered by the eponymous hero. My focus on the psychological accuracy of the depiction of suicide is intended to provide a persuasive answer to the question that has been asked again and again of this play: why does Sophocles dramatize the suicide onstage, contrary to the tragic convention of offstage violence?

Chapter Four traces the reception of the suicide motif in the play in antiquity subsequent to the fifth century BCE, and from the Renaissance until the Early Modern Period. I suggest that the psychological realism of the portrayal of Ajax in Sophocles contributed to the enduring popularity of this play in antiquity, beyond the fifth century BCE through to the beginning of the Byzantine period. However, changing views of suicide within Christianity may have led to a comparative neglect of this play in the Early Modern period.

Chapter Five begins with a look at the choice of the *Ajax* as the inaugural Cambridge Greek play in 1882, at the dawn of the revival of ancient Greek plays in performance, before embarking on a close study of Peter Sellars' production of *Ajax* in the 1980s, in some ways *the* seminal production in terms of the practice of contemporary topicalisation, with its avant-garde and provocative staging, and overtly political themes. In this and Chapter Seven, since live realization is absolutely crucial to the mind-related issues with which I am concerned, it is necessary to provide an extensive account – what theatre scholars call a thick description – of the performances.

Chapter Six studies Ajax envisaged as a combat veteran as depicted in staged readings of the play for soldiers, veterans and their families in the United States of America and the burgeoning scholarship that Ajax as an exemplar of post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD. I examine the ancient evidence and modern views of PTSD, and the development of the latter in the American context. Drawing out the differences in my own approach, I propose that the insistent interpretation of the Sophoclean Ajax in terms of PTSD is unduly restrictive and closes off a wider interpretation.

Chapter Seven is a detailed study of Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Ajax* (2013) which adopts an explicit interpretation of its eponymous hero as a victim of PTSD, and an exploration of whether this succeeds as theatre.

Chapter Eight looks at other notable recent productions involving disparate treatments of the suicide, and draws together the main themes of this study of the psychological underpinnings in the character of the Sophoclean Ajax, and the challenges of translating him into theatre. I end by discussing Euripides' *Heracles* and propose it as a contrast and companion to *Ajax* in its humane treatment of the suicidal protagonist who is effectively helped by Theseus in staying alive.

1.5 Emotions and emotionalism in Greek tragedy

I am not the first to have considered the resemblances between the *Ajax* and modern understanding of suicide. Stanford wrote in 1962: "Sophocles portrays the psychological symptoms of impending suicide much as modern observers have described them: drastic changes in temperament and manner (317 ff.), extreme depression (323 ff.) a rankling sense of divine and human enmity and injustice (401 ff., 442 ff.)."[5] Compared with Aeschylus' extant plays without suicides and Euripides' three (Phaedra, Evadne, Jocasta, Stanford leaves out Menoeceus), Sophocles' seven (Stanford omits Oedipus) prompts the following question: "The high proportion in Sophocles is remarkable. Can it have been because he himself shared the 'cosmic pessimism' of Ajax?"[6]

Anton van Hooff, in his 1990 study of suicide in classical antiquity, quotes Seidensticker but says he was "mistakenly" claiming, in 1983: "It is surprising to what degree the …generally accepted results of modern suicidology are applicable to the Sophoclean Ajax."[7] Van Hooff disagrees with the idea of a "trans-historical" suicidal psychology, and proposes that all suicidal theories are predominantly cultural artefacts, while Elise Garrison's 1995 study applies Durkheim's typologies to the plays within their

[5] Stanford 1963: 290.
[6] Ibid.
[7] B. Seidensticker, 'Die Wahl des Todes bei Sophokles' in *Sophocle*, Entretiens Foundation Hardt 29, Geneva 1983, p 140. Van Hooff 1990: 144, 273.

socio-cultural contexts.[8] However, in the past two decades, much research has taken place to justify a re-assessment of the applicability of suicidology to ancient Greek tragedy.

The study of emotions remains controversial, polarized between nature vs culture.[9] Advocates of nature, and therefore of emotions as universal or transhistorical, interpret emotions as innate or essential based on physiological and neurobiological factors, especially for the basic or primary emotions of anger, fear, sadness and disgust. Opposed to this, emotions are conceived as socially constructed, variable and culturally contingent. Trans-historical and universal interpretations of social, political or psychological phenomena have, at least since the 1960s, and especially since the dominance of multicultural ideals and cultural relativism of the kind practised by philosopher Richard Rorty,[10] largely been disapproved of within classics. There is however growing interest in examining the reasons for the attraction of classical art and theatre across time: whether from the point of view of aesthetics or governing conceptual metaphors such as life as a journey, or theory of mind, or through Neurology, Neuroscience, Cognitive Science or biological determinants such as research into pain and embodied awareness in theatre.[11]

The more dominant strand of research in classics has been to study the plays in the context of the development of the polis and its rituals and institutions. Thus Richard Seaford in *Reciprocity and Ritual: Homer and Tragedy in the Developing City-State* proposes that the introduction of hero cults and the ritual lament associated with them, are echoed in Greek tragedy's plots of the downfall of royal families. Simon Goldhill has focused on how the tragedies problematize the values of the polis as revealed in the civic ideology of the festival in fifth-century Athens.[12] Jasper Griffin, taking issue with both Goldhill and Seaford among others, suggests that tragedy's predilection for extreme

[8] I refer briefly to Durkheim in Chapter Three p. 86 and the limitations of this approach.
[9] My summary is drawn from Jan Plamper 2015.
[10] *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979).
[11] Budelmann 2010.
[12] Goldhill 1987.

situations "naturally made for scenes of the most intense and harrowing pathos"[13] thus "providing a uniquely vivid and piercingly pleasurable enactment of human suffering…a special tragic pleasure: a pleasure that combined debate with reportage, rhetoric with divine revelation, lamentation and hymns with reasoned argument, all seasoned with pathos and music and the dance".[14] He insisted that "the real point of tragedy" is the "suffering and the poetry" and this accounts for its longevity beyond fifth-century Athens.[15]

In subsequent rejoinders, Seaford, while acknowledging that tragedy was "an intensely emotional and an intensely pleasurable experience"[16] highlights theatre's fifth-century social and political roles and themes, and Goldhill proposes exploring the overlapping of emotions and politics in the tragedies,[17] but says: "The emotions remain a destabilising scandal of political theory, the site of literary criticism's most feverish arguments."[18] While agreeing that "tragedy's focus on the grand passions of anger, pity, fear, despair and the self-assertiveness of the heroic figure" is "integral to the formulation of the tragic subject", Goldhill suggests that tragedy is "also manipulated by the tragedians in order to explore the place of emotions within the world of social and political obligation".[19]

While some recent scholarship on emotions has focused on the socio-cultural factors behind emotions (for example, the research project 'The Social and Cultural Construction of Emotions: The Greek Paradigm' at the University of Oxford[20]), Douglas

[13] Griffin 1998: 56.
[14] Ibid. 60.
[15] Griffin 1999: 77.
[16] Seaford 2000: 32.
[17] Goldhill 2000.
[18] Goldhill 2003: 165.
[19] Ibid. 178.
[20] The first volume of the project's findings is *Unveiling Emotions: Sources and Methods for the Study of Emotions in the Greek World* (2012) edited by Angelos Chaniotis.

Cairns, David Konstan and Ed Sanders have explored the interpretation of ancient Greek concepts of emotions.

Cairns argues for the universality of some emotions based on neuro-physiological aspects of the human as the species adapted to geographic conditions, suggesting that "there are aspects of the cultural construction of emotion that will be firmly rooted in our physical nature as human beings".[21] This would include bodily pain, a category both physiological and cultural in its expression, but one that is readily assimilable across cultures, making Philoctetes a figure of sympathy notwithstanding that his pain is described in ancient Greek cultural terms.[22] As described in my research findings in Chapter Three, a number of the psychological constructs of the suicidal mind draw on studies on animals, with whom humans share similarities in brain function and behaviour.

In his study of anger in the *Iliad*, Cairns describes how the metaphors for anger (e.g. as liquid in a container, as fire, as an aggressive animal) correlate with contemporary metaphors that derive from our experiences as physically embodied beings in the world.[23] He also draws on evolutionary psychology for its model of reciprocal altruism to explore how anger is a response to perceived offence against such encoded values. In a later study of honour Cairns demonstrates how the Homeric values of honour, guilt and shame, as exemplified in Achilles and Hector in the *Iliad*, are multi-dimensional and cannot be reduced to private vs public schemas.[24] More importantly, the notion of honour is one that is not necessarily rooted in the pre-modern or primitive but found in contemporary contexts.

My thesis focuses on comprehending the emotions and psychology of the suicidal mind first in our contemporary contexts and then exploring parallels in Sophocles'

[21] Cairns 2003: 13.
[22] Budelmann 2007; Hall 2012.
[23] Cairns 2003.
[24] Cairns 2011. A similar problematization of values occurs in the *Ajax* with Tecmessa, the chorus, the Atreidai and Odysseus enunciating different concepts of honour.

dramatization in the *Ajax* and its likely impact on the audience, exploring in particular the power of pity and empathy. In this regard, I build on W. B. Stanford's seminal 1983 work *Greek Tragedy and the Emotions,* in which Stanford sought to un-weave the particular elements of song, voice, sound, music, dance, costume and use of space employed organically in enacting and expressing emotions on stage to move the ancient Athenian spectators. This emotionalism would be intensified by being performed, without breaks for individual plays, within the sacred space of the sanctuary to Dionysus, watched by spectators whose senses were heightened by wine while sitting pressed close together on narrow seats, and expressing themselves vociferously, cheering on their fellow citizens and tribal members in the chorus. These performance conditions – festival experience, large numbers, drinking, crowding – would have created an atmosphere closer to contemporary music festivals and sports events than of modern theatre.

Stanford quotes multiple ancient sources for the emotional effects of tragic performances.[25] I will quote just one, Gorgias in his *Encomium of Helen*:

> τὴν ποίησιν ἅπασαν καὶ νομίζω καὶ ὀνομάζω λόγον ἔχοντα μέτρον· ἧς
> τοὺς ἀκούοντας εἰσῆλθε καὶ φρίκη περίφοβος καὶ ἔλεος πολύδακρυς καὶ πόθος
> φιλοπενθής, ἐπ' ἀλλοτρίων τε πραγμάτων καὶ σωμάτων εὐτυχίαις καὶ
> δυσπραγίαις ἴδιόν τι πάθημα διὰ τῶν λόγων ἔπαθεν ἡ ψυχή.
>
> I consider all poetry to be speech (logos) that possesses meter, and I give it this name. Those who hear it are penetrated by a terribly fearful shuddering, a much-weeping pity, and a yearning that desires grief, and on the basis of the fortunes and misfortunes of other people's actions and bodies their soul is affected, by an affection of its own, by the medium of words.[26]

[25] Stanford 1983: 3-10.
[26] Gorgias *Encomium of Helen* D24 in *Early Greek Philosophy* Loeb Classical Library Vol VIII Sophists Part I Edited and translated by Andre Laks and Glenn Most 167-85 at p.175.

Thus Stanford: "The supreme tragic emotion, to judge from the surviving tragedies, is *eleos* or *oiktos*"[27] suggesting "agonies of feeling" far beyond the connotations of the English word "pity", a word which suggests more of a mental attitude rather than the Greek visceral tragic experience. Stanford suggests the use of "compassionate grief" instead of "pity", to mean a sharing with or feeling in the "depths of being" as closer to the Greek *eleos* or *oiktos*.[28] Even the English word, empathy, which I shall use extensively, does not quite capture the intensity of the feelings that appears to have been evoked in the ancient audience but comes closer to Stanford's formulation.[29]

"Pity" though is a contested emotion in classics. In studies exploring the emotions of the ancient Greeks, Konstan adopts Aristotle's definitions in the *Rhetoric* (2.8, 1385b13-16) to propose that Greek pity is closely aligned to concepts of desert, that is, only those who have not deserved their misfortune are pitied.[30] That element of moral judgment implies a distance between the pitier and the pitied, and differs from identification with the sufferer in contemporary notions of empathy. Cairns disagrees, noting that "putting oneself in the position of another" is a regular feature of ancient Greek *eleos*, quoting *Iliad* 24. 485–510, *Ajax* 121-6, *Philoctetes* 501–6, *Oedipus at Colonus* 566–8, Euripides *Hecuba* 282–7, Herodotus 1. 86. 6, 7. 46. 2.[31] Reviewing Konstan's *Pity Transformed*, Cairns suggests that Aristotle was making a highly-schematic binary argument from rhetoric[32] and since Aristotle at *Rhetoric* 1386a4-16 conceded that the undeserved conditions of old age, illness, deformity and ugliness also elicited pity, concludes that "…the notion that pity rests fundamentally on a recognition of the shared

[27] Stanford 1983: 23.
[28] Ibid. 24.
[29] I am aware that empathy has been the focus of much recent philosophical and psychoanalytical work on the allied, but more wide-ranging, concept of intersubjectivity, as the implications of Edmund Husserl's phenomenological approach have been reassessed (see Husserl (1973) and Orange, Atwood and Stolorow (1997)). The psychoanalytical and therapeutic discussion of suicide, however, prefers the term empathy, and for that reason I am not engaging with discussions of intersubjectivity in this thesis.
[30] Konstan 2001, 2006.
[31] Cairns 2008: 51-2.
[32] Cairns 2004: 63.

vulnerability of all humanity is a regular aspect of the ancient concept of pity".[33] Cairns also challenges Konstan's view that pity did not extend to *philoi* or to the self: the *Iliad's* slave-women's pity for themselves (XIX.301-2) is a clear example of the latter.

Sandridge re-states the position, with which I concur: "Contrary to Aristotle, therefore, pity may be philanthropic (non-self-regarding), non-merit based and familial."[34] He takes the argument further to propose that "Self-regarding, non-familial, non-merit-based pity is thus most conducive to saving or redeeming proud, isolated, defiant and self-destructive characters... Just as self-regarding pity preserves the dignity of these Sophoclean protagonists, it also points up their humanity, even though they are often regarded as above the plane of humanity, i.e., as "great" or "heroic" in spirit."[35] "I suggest that self-regarding pity by its nature precludes the object of pity being above humanity."[36] Thus Odysseus' pity for Ajax engages with his humanity even when he is in the throes of madness inflicted by Athena.

Cairns criticises Konstan's method in comparing single words to their nearest equivalents and instead advocates an approach using emotional "scripts" using a range of emotion words. A "script" describes scenarios with which particular emotion terms are associated in the two cultures, in their "plurality of applications, senses, and interpretations" allowing an examination of "any significant overlap, in terms of the scripts to which they refer, between the emotional terms of two different languages".[37] On this basis he rejects Konstan's definition of "jealousy" as too narrow in its application to similar scripts in ancient Greek.[38]

[33] Ibid. 65.
[34] Sandridge 2008: 435.
[35] Ibid. 446.
[36] Ibid. 447.
[37] Cairns 2008: 46, 50.
[38] Ibid. 56.

Sanders adopts Cairns' approach in his monograph *Envy and Jealousy in Classical Athens* and utilizes "scripts" to explore the concepts of envy and jealousy in English to Greek *phthonos* to create a nuanced picture of the latter. Sanders utilizes modern social scientific scholarship on envy, jealousy and related emotions in order to compare them to ancient parallels. I adopt a similar method in Chapter Three to describe contemporary research on suicidal states of mind and propose that the "scripts" and "scenarios" that they represent parallel Sophocles' depiction of Ajax.

In particular, *eleos* and *oiktos* map onto contemporary concepts of pity and empathy, though the modern concepts lack the visceral intensity of the Greek tragic experience. Next, and going beyond pity, are the primary or basic emotions discussed earlier, the "strongest and most visceral [emotions] are terror, anger, passionate desire, hate and grief."[39] The emotions shade into each other and are felt in the *psuche* physically: "The one indivisible element in emotionalism is the *psuche*, which feels every bodily sensation and mental reaction together as one experience without questioning what is physical and what intellectual (or imaginary) – and without separating grief from pain…"[40] Stanford's 1983 interpretation resembles the more recent approaches of Cairns and Sanders.

Dramatic noises such as cries, screams, shouts of joy also contributed to a deeply moving experience. "Compared to English, ancient Greek had an extraordinarily wide selection of emotional cries, over thirty of them."[41] The longest sequence of these in our surviving texts consists of those uttered by Philoctetes at 754. "When these various cries were uttered by uninhibited actors in full voice – more tolerable in an unroofed theatre – they must have had a tremendous emotional effect…The weight of tradition in northern Europe and America is against such open-mouthed and open-hearted demonstrations of

[39] Stanford 1983: 45.
[40] Ibid. 45-6.
[41] Ibid. 57.

grief, pain and joy, in life or in literature."[42] Further, "we have not the vocabulary to produce equivalents for the many Greek forms" while "…the fact that the ancient Greeks were accustomed to ritual lamentations in their public and private life made [exploitation of lament in tragedy] more tolerable."[43]

Ritual lament for the dead is an emotional genre and in pre-classical Greece belonged to women. Margaret Alexiou has traced how women were displaced from funeral rites and public mourning over the course of the development of the democratic polis in the sixth and fifth centuries.[44] Rites of lamentation passed from aristocratic clans to public festivals, hero cults and mystery cults. Funeral lament in the aristocratic clans inciting revenge vendettas may have been another reason to limit women's participation in funerals: Holst-Warhaft proposes that the *Oresteia* demonstrates the disturbing power of women's laments to incite revenge and violence, resulting in the eclipse of private revenge by jury trial in the democratic polis and partial taming of women's voices from Erinyes to Eumenides.[45] Using anthropological studies of contemporary Mediterranean society to supplement ancient source material, she proposes that women's lament in the pre-classical period as recited in the *Iliad* was a sophisticated genre, and its language, music and gesture were later appropriated by the tragedians and sung by men who were actors in the ancient theatre. This emotionalism contributed to Plato's criticism and its gendering in real life (*Plato's Republic* III.388 a-e and X.604 b- 607a). No longer restricted to women, "tragic drama permitted men to lament"[46] and Foley points out "Sophocles' mature males tend to engage in such intense, sung self-regret far more than

[42] Ibid. 60.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Alexiou 1974.
[45] Holst-Warhaft 1992.
[46] Suter 2008: 171.

male characters in plays by Aeschylus and Euripides and more often than his women. Lamenting women outnumber males in extant plays by Aeschylus and Euripides."[47]

Thus "To ignore their intense emotionalism as one reads a Greek tragedy is like crossing the Sahara in an air-conditioned car."[48] Vocabulary, figures of speech, exclamatory cries worked together to create a seamless whole: "At a masterly performance in the theatre there would be no questions about brain-language and heart-language."[49] This requires approaching the plays "holistically and psychosomatically" and not splitting mind, senses and emotions.[50]

An emphasis on emotions is not to deny the socio-political-cultural aspects: *Ajax* is a play of its time with its evoking of Homeric parallels, treatment of hero cult and revenge, and echoes of Athenian politics. However, partly owing to the absence of a definitive date for the play, political interpretations differ widely: Rose argues for Ajax as the best political hero,[51] Rosenbloom for Odysseus[52] and suggesting that neither can claim exemplary political leadership, Cairns declares "The *Ajax* is a problem play."[53]

A problem for politics perhaps but not for the emotional power of its depiction, much of which depends on the evocation of pity, reminding us in the words of Winnington-Ingram: "That pity was for Sophocles a supreme value need hardly be argued. Pity inspires every work of his that has come down to us - pity and *suggnomen*, that capacity to enter into the feelings of another which made possible every aspect of his dramatic creation."[54] This capacity for empathy, and the intense emotionalism of the

[47] Foley 2013: 865.
[48] Stanford 1982: 60-1.
[49] Ibid. 105.
[50] Ibid. 164.
[51] Rose 1995.
[52] Rosenbloom 2001.
[53] Cairns 2006: 121.
[54] Winnington-Ingram 1980: 328.

ancient stage, enabled Sophocles' perceptive delineation of psychological states as I explain in detail in Chapter Three.[55]

1.6 Studies of Suicide in Antiquity

To my knowledge, the Greek tragic plays have not been studied with specific focus on the emotional and psychological states relating to suicide. Stanford questioned whether Sophocles shared the 'cosmic pessimism' of Ajax[56] and Knox regarded the Sophoclean tragic protagonist's intransigent and unwavering commitment to a central idea as the prime reason for the many suicides in Sophocles: "The world as it is, life as it is lived, refuses them freedom to be what they are, and they are ready to leave it rather than to change."[57]

There appear to have been diverse attitudes to suicide in antiquity, and not a monolithic taboo against it as in Christian orthodoxy. The picture is complicated by the many different *poleis* over a wide geographical area and over a long period of time. For the period under discussion, Garrison's analysis of fifth-century sources such as Herodotus and Thucydides suggests that these authors "leave us with the sense not that suicide created 'moral revulsion,' but that it provided people with an honorable release from an undesirable life, a life made unbearable because of shame or dishonor, that is, because of unfavorable societal perception."[58] Her examination of the epigraphical evidence also suggests there was no pollution associated with the corpses of suicides beyond the usual pollution associated with dead bodies.

In this chapter, I largely omit reference to Plato and Aristotle, since their writings appear later than the period I am concerned with, and, as Vernant showed long ago, there

[55] Post Stanford, Alford 1993 proposes that the tragedians were unleashing pity and compassion as civilizing forces, as education into feelings.
[56] 1963: 290.
[57] Knox 1964: 42.
[58] Garrison 1995:25.

was an epistemological paradigm shift at the end of the fifth century BCE in terms of concepts of individual self-determination and psychological agency.[59]

Anton van Hooff[60] notes that we lack the epidemiological data used in modern methods of studying suicide, and the information we do possess is overwhelmingly that of observers and commentators on the process and persons who killed themselves: "The 'cause' of an (accomplished) suicide is always *the explanation given by an observer: after the act, he imposes a logical structure on the phenomena*."[61] (My italics.) Thus motives imputed to the dead are expressed in the words and reflect the values of the commentators, providing an opportunity to study ancient values with regard to self-killing. Garrison concurs: "Suicide is a social phenomenon, steeped in ethical ramifications, for the dramatists of the fifth century and their audiences, then and now."[62] Neither author specifically studies the psychological processes that I focus on, though both discuss emotions as motives to suicide.

From a corpus of 960 cases of suicide drawn from literary, biographical, historiographical and mythic material, (the last because "mythology is the mental universe of the ancient world"[63]) van Hooff isolates 564 documented, historical cases.

On methods, van Hooff maintains that intent was more often than not followed by completion and that attempts were seldom gambles or cries for help concluding that "The overall character of self-killing in antiquity requires the use of sure and therefore hard methods."[64] As Chapter Three will demonstrate, death is likely to be the result of the lethality of the means employed rather than a barometer of the sureness of intent. Hanging, jumping from heights, and swords are all likely to be lethal unlike the prescription drugs widely used today. But the presence of other people or timely

[59] Jean-Pierre Vernant 1972, 1981.
[60] van Hooff 1990.
[61] Ibid. 82.
[62] Ibid. 33.
[63] Van Hooff 1990: 13.
[64] Ibid. 61, 78.

intervention could prevent suicide: Achilles' hands are gripped by Antilochus to prevent the former doing injury to himself (*Il*. XVIII.34), nooses could and were untied (Clytemnestra in *Agamemnon* 875-6), and where the intent appears to starve to death (Phaedra in *Hippolytus* 130-40), friends and family are motivated to act (267-308, 490-7). These tragic examples can be read in dramatic terms but also as clues to ambivalence. In contrast, Alexander attempting to cut his own throat in shame over the death of Kleitos did not withdraw into isolation to kill himself.[65] Accordingly, looking for a deserted place is a surer indication of lethal intent: suicide then and now remains a lonely act.[66] Thus in Herodotus 1.45, Adrastus, after he has accidentally killed Croesus' son Atys, waits for "when the tomb was undisturbed by the presence of men" before slaying himself there. Examples of public acts of suicide where intervention is impossible include self-immolation on funeral pyres, but this appears only in myth,[67] and not among the documented cases identified by van Hooff.

On "causes" of suicide, van Hooff isolates these by perceived motive, and also by emotions: despair, grief, shame, anger, necessity, revenge, and/or physical pain. There is considerable overlap here; despair becomes a catch-all category where no other cause is designated, since "in the last resort all suicides are committed because hope has been lost."[68]

According to van Hooff's classification, "only seventeen cases can be explained by mental troubles" specifically madness in terms of *furor* or anger,[69] where it is the last link in a chain of factors which lead up to suicide. In this view, Ajax's suicide is caused by insanity.[70] And even though "no mythical suicide can be classified as real…the

[65] Ibid. 120.
[66] This is in the Greek context; elite Roman death often had a social and public dimension.
[67] Heracles and Evadne on self-immolation.
[68] Van Hooff 1990: 87.
[69] Ibid. 97.
[70] Ibid. 99. A view shared by Musurillo 1967 who interprets Ajax's songs and speeches as the result of a continuing madness.

evolution of the evaluation of the self-destruction by this hero reflects changing attitudes in the course of many centuries."[71] Ajax's suicide is ascribed at different times to rage, madness, shame and hybris.

On sex ratios, the mythical materials show females outnumbering males, contrary to the documented cases which suggest a 3:1 or 2:1 ratio of male to female suicides, a ratio that reflects both modern and pre-modern societies, as discussed in Chapter Three. But myth fulfils other needs, hence the skewed sex ratios. Diverse literary sources legitimized female self-killing in mourning, yet van Hooff came across no historical Greek examples, suggesting this was an ideal preached to women, though the paucity of data must be kept in mind.[72] Similarly, historical examples of wives choosing to die like Alcestis are entirely lacking.

Shame is regarded as the motive for female suicide, often in relation to the threat or aftermath of sexual humiliation.[73] Nicole Loraux argues that tragic deaths are gendered with women's suicides taking place in the interior of the house. However withdrawal to a lonely place in order to forestall intervention is the usual act in suicide; accordingly a movement indoors for a woman intent on suicide is not unexpected. Hanging is the usual method adopted notwithstanding that Deianeira and Eurydice resort to the sword: here the language (e.g. Deianeira stabs herself on the left side) suggests a gendering of deaths such that "…whatever freedom the tragic discourse of the Greeks offered to women, it did not allow them ultimately to transgress the frontier that divided and opposed the sexes."[74] The woman's body is always treated differently from the man's: the female suicide's body often swings in the air either as she flings herself from a noose or a height, whereas Ajax's death is from the hoplite sword, firmly planted in the earth.[75] Thus "the

[71] Ibid. 13-4.
[72] Ibid. 104.
[73] Ibid. 116-7.
[74] Loraux 1987: 60.
[75] Ibid. 20.

woman in tragedy is more entitled to play the man in her death than the man is to assume any aspect of woman's conduct, even in his manner of death. For women there is liberty in tragedy – liberty in death."[76] Yet as discussed above, Sophocles' lamenting heroes often behave as women while in the throes of pain or a suicidal crisis.

But men are also affected by shame. For van Hooff, this is one of the main differences between the ancient and modern worlds: a shame culture that prizes public reputation, the loss of which the observer considers a motive for suicide, is contrasted with the internal motives of guilt or depression of moderns.[77] "Ancient observers always preferred to see self-killing as the reaction to the – assumed – opinion of the world. In explaining suicide they chose shame where possible."[78] Acts are regarded as intentional and deliberate, taken in freedom and not while suffering mental illness: "Ancient interpretation is biased towards stressing freedom and consciousness in motivation."[79]

The vocabulary on suicide is extensive: Van Hooff details 167 terms in Greek and 173 terms in Latin for self-killing.[80] "Many are the words and phrases the ancients had available to express the horror, the astonishment and the respect for the hand that was directed against the body it was part of…The rich rhetorical usage is dominated by the mixture of bewilderment, approval and admiration".[81] The neutrality of description, focusing on *autos* or self, and "the absence of a completely hostile usage" often "denote the admiration of the observer for such a show of personal autonomy and free will."[82] Thus "Nobody in the *Aias* expresses a principled rejection of heroic suicide as such."[83]

[76] Ibid. 17.
[77] Van Hooff 1990: 120.
[78] Ibid. 121-2.
[79] Ibid. 131.
[80] Ibid. Appendix C.
[81] Ibid. 140.
[82] Ibid. 141.
[83] Ibid. 145.

Garrison notes that "One of [tragedy's] outstanding characteristics is the extent to which virtually all tragic suicides receive sympathy."[84]

"Death by report lends itself to conjecture vastly more than does violence exposed to the public view."[85] Matthew Hiscock explores the nature of these conjectures and the degree of personal autonomy in reports of suicide in Sophocles.[86] The ambiguities in the messenger's report at *Antigone* 1220-30 raises questions of Haemon's possible complicity in Antigone's death, and Hiscock takes issue with editors disambiguating the text to shoehorn interpretations of her suicide, which has become dogma. In analysing the "debate on shared agency" in *Ant* 1301-1305 & 1172-1177, *Trachiniae* 879-95, and *Ajax* 898-910, Hiscock suggests that "Sophocles is drawn to narratives of self-killing because he and his audience are intensely engaged with the emerging problem of the *autocheir*…" or self-killer (a word that means kin-killer), through "a strategy of eliding or obscuring the actual moment of self-destruction" and "subjecting self-killings to detailed retrospective analysis or the verbal post-mortem".[87] This analysis advances Hiscock's philosophical discussion of when self-killing became an act of true autonomy[88] but he says: "In each of these cases the moment of death is displaced or elided and takes place only in the *reader's* imagination."[89] (My italics) Descriptions of actions that are elided or displaced in messenger speeches, such as the moment of Deianeira's and Eurydice's deaths, which then take place in the spectators' imaginations, apply to Athenian tragedy generally, a genre in which the imagination recreates much off-stage action unlike contemporary drama and film.

[84] Garrison 1995:33.
[85] Loraux 1987: x.
[86] Hiscock 2018.
[87] Hiscock 2018: 3.
[88] The suicide as kin-killer also alludes to how self-killing rents the fabric of the family, devastation that those bereaved by suicide can attest to.
[89] Hiscock 2018: 7.

As mentioned, completed suicide is the quintessential private act (which makes Ajax's onstage suicide such a shocking exception) and cohere well with messenger speeches of dramatic off-stage action. In dramatic performances written and acted to evoke pity, fear and grief, the confused and confusing reports of the distressing act of suicide, and the uncertainty of cause and agency debated between characters, serves to increase dramatic tension. The disjointed responses of interlocutors and their repetitious questions are also prompted by the shock and horror at the act, repetitions that, in a large theatrical space with ascending tiers of spectators, communicates the horror and finality of the deed thus intensifying the pathos. In addition, questions exploring responsibility (e.g. at *Trachiniae* 879-95) are concerned with agency in a world where gods govern and cosmic plans are unravelled in the course of the play.

Thus the dialogue between Tecmessa and the chorus at *Ajax* 898-910 succeeds in Tecmessa conveying the information of the body impaled on the sword (for the benefit of the audience on the upper levels unable to see the action), then covering it to enable the actor to leave and be replaced with a dummy.[90] Hiscock's criticism that the dialogue "in which the self-killer's agency is *unnecessarily* restated – the impression, in short, of a *lack of linear dramatic logic*"[91] would not apply in the theatre. (My italics.) Throughout Hiscock refers to "readers", not spectators; readers may well lack patience with the confusion and repeated questioning and suspensions, e.g. at *Ajax* 898 to 910, where the "verbal post-mortem suspends the action at a pivotal moment to explore the origins and consequences of the death".[92] In the theatre, this suspension is the necessary space for lamentation consequent on a shocking suicide, but for a reader in her library may well disclose "a lack of linear dramatic logic".

[90] I discuss staging of the suicide in Chapter Three pp. 169-70.
[91] Hiscock 2018: 16.
[92] Ibid. 19.

1.7 Depictions of Suicide in Sophocles' Extant Plays

In this section, I review some significant elements in Sophocles' exploration of suicide in the extant plays, elements that will inform my subsequent discussion of the *Ajax*. In particular, I demonstrate how skilfully Sophocles evokes piteous "agonies of feeling" both on-stage and off. As empathy is enormously important for both my argument and contemporary understanding of helpful and unhelpful ways of engaging the suicidal, I focus particularly on empathy: Deianeira's supremely empathetic character, the empathy of the chorus for Electra, and the empathy of Neoptolemus and the chorus for Philoctetes. I also look at the isolation of Sophoclean characters who kill themselves, and the intense physical and / or psychological pain they experience.

In *Oedipus Tyrannos,* having intuited the truth from the evidence of the messenger and the old shepherd and failed to stop Oedipus pursuing his enquiry, Jocasta cries out:

> ἰοὺ ἰού, δύστηνε· τοῦτο γάρ σ᾽ ἔχω
> μόνον προσειπεῖν, ἄλλο δ᾽ οὔποθ᾽ ὕστερον (1071-2)
>
> Ah, ah, unhappy one! That is all that I can say to you, and nothing anymore![93]

Those last words take on ominous significance after the messenger reports her precipitous rush to suicide, with pitiful details of her last moments. Jocasta has attempted, with increasing urgency, to prevent the truth being revealed (1056-72) and having failed, appears unable to endure the consequences.[94] The messenger's description of her swift rush to death and of Oedipus' self-mutilation provokes great pathos and prepares the

[93] All translations of the plays are from Sophocles, Volume I. *Ajax. Electra. Oedipus Tyrannus.* (Loeb Classical Library No. 20) and Volume II. *Antigone. Women of Trachis. Philoctetes. Oedipus at Colonus.* (Loeb Classical Library No. 21), edited and translated by Hugh Lloyd-Jones (1994) Harvard University Press.
[94] Shame is usually proposed as the cause but Euripides has Jocasta alive in *Phoenician Women*; accordingly shame need not be the inevitable cause.

audience for the entrance of the blind, bleeding, stumbling Oedipus. In their immediate reaction, the chorus recoil in horror and revulsion: when Oedipus sings in despair that he ought to have died on Cithaeron, they agree, almost judiciously comparing death favourably to blindness, implying they are unable to understand why he has not killed himself:

> κρείσσων γὰρ ἦσθα μηκέτ᾽ ὢν ἢ ζῶν τυφλός. (1368)
>
> for you would have been better dead than living but blind.

Here the chorus is expressing what some in the audience may be thinking. Oedipus' own reasons for staying alive (unable to face his parents in Hades at 1369-74) seem somehow inadequate; instead the sight and grievous lamentation of the suffering blinded Oedipus enable Sophocles to create those agonies of feeling and better fulfil the play's themes of self-ignorance and blindness more than any display of Oedipus' corpse would have achieved.

Antigone is a play coloured by death from beginning to end, contained within the tragedies of the doomed Labdacids. In the very first line, we are referred to the family, with the eponymous heroine addressing her sister of the same womb. Fifty lines later Ismene catalogues the family crimes: Oedipus' parricide and incest, the suicide of Jocasta, and the mutual destruction of the brothers (49-57). Antigone associates herself with death through words and actions, desiring to lie in death with Polyneikes and her family, lingering close to the corpse after the first burial and repeating the burial a second time, and in exchanges with Creon when brought before him (460-4). She explicitly links her troubles to those of her family and declares her aim to remain part of her birth family. She exhorts Creon not to delay:

> θέλεις τι μεῖζον ἢ κατακτεῖναί μ᾽ ἑλών; 497
>
> Do you wish for anything more than to take me and kill me?

ἐγὼ μὲν οὐδέν· τοῦτ᾽ ἔχων ἅπαντ᾽ ἔχω. 498

Not I! When I have that, I have everything.

τί δῆτα μέλλεις; 499

Then why do you delay?

Antigone will share her death with no one, especially not Ismene, whom she rejects in the exchanges between 536 and 560. Only when on her way to death does Antigone bemoan her in-between state, the first time her will seems to waver (850-3). Her lament at 891-928 is in more general terms and when the chorus is moved to empathize with her, it is the family history they lament. Antigone's frenzied, desperate state of mind comes across in these final passages, and once entombed, literally isolated and trapped, not expecting rescue, she does not wait for death, but embraces it swiftly, imitating her mother's mode of self-killing: hanging.[95] While Hiscock cautions reading suicide into lexical ambiguities, Holst-Warhaft proposes revenge through suicide: as in contemporary traditional laments, Antigone is avenging her brother (her blood family) by destroying Creon: "Her remarks are calculated not to save her life but to destroy his. For that she needs to use her artful lament to persuade the chorus of his culpability, her own rightness."[96] In my view, suicide is more likely given Antigone's repeated desire for death and also more psychologically persuasive in that it precipitates Haemon's attack on Creon, and his subsequent suicide next to Antigone (1231-1243): his are impulsive acts brought about by sudden grief, thwarted love, and anger at his father. Pathos is then intensified when Creon carries in the body of Haemon (1261), while lamenting himself as the murderer of his son (1266-9).

[95] Incarceration increases the risk of suicide: prisoners on remand, and the prison population generally, have higher rates of suicide. Cf. p. 36 of the 2014 World Health Organization report. I discuss this report in Chapter Three.

[96] Holst-Warhaft 1992: 132.

The sword-thrust through the side is also the method chosen by Eurydice in imitation of Haemon's act and directed against Creon. At the end of the messenger's speech at 1243, Eurydice departs without a word, a silent exit and withdrawal into the *oikos* which makes the chorus uneasy (1244-5), an uneasiness foreshadowing the news of her own suicide: after Creon's entrance with the body of Haemon, the news of Eurydice's death is conveyed by the next messenger:

> †ἡ δ᾽ ὀξύθηκτος ἥδε βωμία πέριξ†
> λύει κελαινὰ βλέφαρα, κωκύσασα μὲν
> τοῦ πρὶν θανόντος Μεγαρέως κενὸν λέχος,
> αὖθις δὲ τοῦδε, λοίσθιον δὲ σοὶ κακὰς
> πράξεις ἐφυμνήσασα τῷ παιδοκτόνῳ. 1300-5
>
> Pierced by the sharp sword . . . near the altar, she . . . closed her darkening eyes, after she had lamented the empty marriage bed of Megareus, who died earlier, and again of Haemon, and at the last had called down curses upon you, the killer of your son.

> ὡς αἰτίαν γε τῶνδε κἀκείνων ἔχων πρὸς τῆς θανούσης τῆσδ᾽ ἐπεσκήπτου μόρων.1312-3
>
> You were reproached by the dead as guilty of those deaths and these.

Motivated by revenge in addition to grief at the loss of both her sons: Eurydice's curses are to punish Creon as the culprit even as the manner of her death re-enacts that of Haemon:

> παίσασ᾽ ὑφ᾽ ἧπαρ αὐτόχειρ αὑτήν, ὅπως
> παιδὸς τόδ᾽ ᾖσθετ᾽ ὀξυκώκυτον πάθος. 1315-6
>
> With her own hand she struck herself beneath the liver, so that she experienced the suffering of her son, loudly to be lamented.

The information that she has recently lost her other son, which has been repressed throughout the play, not even mentioned by Megareus' father Creon himself, creates a sense that some kind of ban on expressing her rage and grief had previously been in operation. At the end, Creon, owning guilt for the deaths, asks to be led away to death (1320-5). Death succeeding death, the gods' condemnation of Creon's actions and his final acknowledgment of guilt would have left the audience in a collective state of "compassionate grief".

In the last of the Theban plays, *Oedipus at Colonus*, the now venerable Oedipus freely seeks death at the hands of the gods. His mutilated and polluted body is no longer a curse; his death bestows a blessing on the land which will contain it and will be a place for hero cult. As Seaford and others have suggested, the importance of gaining a decent burial for Ajax in his tragedy may have been the result of a need to stage a similar aetiological explanation for the hero cult of Ajax in Attica.[97] Oedipus has mastered the lessons of time (607-15, an echo of Ajax's great speech at 646-92), has outlasted his dishonour and now uses his death to be a lasting boon for his benefactors. Thus, while Oedipus lived and endured, Ajax took the immediate course, the one suggested by the chorus to Oedipus in the earlier play at 1368. But in another sense this Oedipus is unchanged from the wrathful personage of before, since he goes to his death cursing his sons, in an echo of the bitter, unrepentant, wrathful Ajax, who dies cursing his enemies.

Deianeira is perhaps Sophocles' most empathetic character in the extant plays. She displays empathy in her address to the chorus at 141-3, expresses pity for the captives at 243 and 298-302 and Iole at 307-8 and 320-1, again in stichomythia with Lichas at 308-19 and in withholding further questioning of Iole at 329-32. Even after learning of Heracles' passion for Iole, she speaks with compassion for her at 463-67, and is not

[97] See e.g. March 1991-93.

actively hostile, instead trying to win back Heracles' love through the deadly potion. But as soon as Deianeira realizes the deadly potency of her gift to Heracles, she says she will destroy herself, in order not to live with shame at what she had done:

> καίτοι δέδοκται, κεῖνος εἰ σφαλήσεται,
> ταὐτῇ σὺν ὁρμῇ κἀμὲ συνθανεῖν ἅμα.
> ζῆν γὰρ κακῶς κλύουσαν οὐκ ἀνασχετόν,
> ἥτις προτιμᾷ μὴ κακὴ πεφυκέναι. (719-22)
>
> Well, I have determined, if he comes to grief, that with the same movement I too shall die with him. For a woman whose care is to be good cannot bear to live and to enjoy evil repute.

She rejects the chorus' attempt to comfort her with the argument that she did not intend harm:

> τοιαῦτά τἂν λέξειεν οὐχ ὁ τοῦ κακοῦ
> κοινωνός, ἀλλ᾽ ᾧ μηδὲν ἔστ᾽ οἴκοι βαρύ. (729-30)
>
> That is the kind of thing that a person who has no trouble of his own would say, but not the one to whom the evil belongs.

This is psychologically perceptive: attempts to reassure often cannot reach the suffering individual even when kindly meant. But it is her son's frantic accusations and curses that are the immediate impetus for her suicide as he begins by demanding her death:

> ὦ μῆτερ, ὡς ἂν ἐκ τριῶν σ᾽ ἓν εἰλόμην,
> ἢ μηκέτ᾽ εἶναι ζῶσαν, ἢ σεσωμένην
> νἄλλου κεκλῆσθαι μητέρ᾽, ἢ λώους φρένας
> τῶν νῦν παρουσῶν τῶνδ᾽ ἀμείψασθαί ποθεν. (734-7)

Mother, I would choose one of three things, that you should no longer be alive, or that you should survive but be called someone else's mother, or that you should somehow acquire a better heart than the one you have!

Only after hearing Hyllus' curse on her, when he calls on justice and the Erinyes to avenge him (807-12), Deianeira departs in silence, a silence underscored by the chorus calling after her that her silence is tantamount to confession (813-4). Hyllus condemns her to suffer his father's fate (819-20), his hostility contrasting with the chorus, who sing empathetically of the ignorance of Deianeira when she acted, and naming Nessus and the hydra joint killers with her (841-6). The nurse enters with grim news 874-5. She has to repeat the news of the suicide, and insist that she was an eye witness (889-93) as the chorus wonders at a woman's daring:

καὶ ταῦτ᾽ ἔτλη τις χεὶρ γυναικεία κτίσαι; 898

And did a woman bring herself to do this with her own hand?

The nurse had been following the distraught woman who on entering the house, weeping took leave of her familiar possessions and the slaves, lamenting her fate, before reaching her bedroom. There the nurse hid herself in order to watch but on realising Deianeira's intention, ran to warn Hyllus. Too late, for the deed is done before they return, and Hyllus laments his accusations and curse, having learned the truth (932-42). The nurse has not witnessed the actual moment but is enough of an eye witness to confirm the death. The descriptions of Deianeira's end and Hyllus' lamentations are full of pathos.

Heracles is carried in, prostrate but silent; like Philoctetes, his pain comes and goes. Heracles calls out for death (1010-16), but he also cries out repeatedly in self-pity and invites pity for his suffering:

οἴκτιρόν τέ με

πολλοῖσιν οἰκτρόν, ὅστις ὥστε παρθένος
βέβρυχα κλαίων, καὶ τόδ᾽ οὐδ᾽ ἂν εἷς ποτε
τόνδ᾽ ἄνδρα φαίη πρόσθ᾽ ἰδεῖν δεδρακότα,
ἀλλ᾽ ἀστένακτος αἰὲν εἰχόμην κακοῖς. (1070-74)

Pity me, pitiable in many ways, I who am crying out, weeping like a girl, and no one can say he saw this man do such a thing before, but though racked with torments I never would lament! But now such a thing has shown me as a womanish creature.

This display of a suffering and despoiled body also appears in *Ajax* at 348-53; here Heracles calls to Hyllus and the chorus to look on his ravaged body:

καὶ νῦν προσελθὼν στῆθι πλησίον πατρός,
σκέψαι δ᾽ ὁποίας ταῦτα συμφορᾶς ὕπο
πέπονθα· δείξω γὰρ τάδ᾽ ἐκ καλυμμάτων.
ἰδού, θεᾶσθε πάντες ἄθλιον δέμας,
ὁρᾶτε τὸν δύστηνον, ὡς οἰκτρῶς ἔχω. 1076-80

And now draw near and stand close to your father, and see what a calamity has done this to me; for I will show it to you without a veil. Look, gaze, all of you, on my miserable body, see the unhappy one, his pitiable state!

As Biggs has written, Heracles is cut off from his environment, and when he revives, is unsure of where he is and who surrounds him (983ff.): "…his awareness is not for externals. *Intense pain turns all the sufferer's concentration inward* (and thereby, of course, intensifies itself). Thus Heracles can refuse to understand Hyllus' vindication of

Deianeira, and justify the refusal by his disease."[98] (My italics.) I return to this alienating isolation later, for it characterizes Ajax and other suffering protagonists of Sophocles.

Sophocles' Heracles dies reconciled to his fate as the fulfilment of Zeus' plan. Death is the release of his labours; he chooses and commands a funeral pyre on Oeta and goes willingly to his death there.

Though *Electra* and *Philoctetes* are without completed suicides, the evocation of empathy in both, and the threatened suicide in the latter are relevant to my argument. The chorus chide Electra (121ff) for her never-ending grief but also engage with her empathetically, reminding her that she does not suffer alone, exhorting her to have courage (173-4) and counselling the effects of time in ameliorating grief (177-8). Almost unprompted, they recall the day of Agamemnon's death (193-200), which triggers Electra's grief once more at the murder, with its repercussions on her own life (201-12). Once again the chorus asks her to moderate her grief and she acknowledges their kindness. In shared lamentation, both chorus and Electra honour the dead Agamemnon and rail against the murderers. The chorus declare their willingness to follow Electra *even if what they say is wrong* (251-3), (my italics) and this prompts from Electra a narrative of her further sufferings at 254-309. Later, in the intensity of Electra's mourning after hearing the false story of Orestes' death, the chorus joins in lament: (823-70). This is a chorus in sympathy with the protagonist, even when they do not agree with her. Ajax's chorus responds differently, as we shall examine in Chapter Three.

Plot and action in *Philoctetes* turn very much on empathy: Neoptolemus' feelings for the stricken hero changes in the course of the play and his pity for Philoctetes brings about two pivotal turns in the action: first when Neoptolemus rejects his own earlier deception to speak the truth, and second when he abandons Odysseus to return the bow and

[98] Biggs 1966: 228.

attempts persuasion instead. Sophocles increases the pity by making Lemnos an uninhabited island thereby isolating Philoctetes almost entirely,[99] and has the chorus repeatedly emphasize the desolate, painful and wretched condition of the abandoned hero:

δῆλον ἔμοιγ᾽ ὡς φορβῆς χρείᾳ
στίβον ὀγμεύει τῇδε πέλας που.
ταύτην γὰρ ἔχειν βιοτῆς αὐτὸν
λόγος ἐστὶ φύσιν, θηροβολοῦντα
πτηνοῖς ἰοῖς σμυγερὸν σμυγερῶς,
οὐδέ τιν᾽ αὐτῷ
παιῶνα κακῶν ἐπινωμᾶν. 162-8

It is clear to me that it is the need for food that makes him trail his painful step somewhere near here. For that is the kind of life that he is said to lead, shooting beasts with his winged arrows, *painfully in his pain*, and *none, they say, draws near him to heal* his afflictions.

The chorus draw out the pitiable implications of Philoctetes' isolation and wonder at the man's endurance:

οἰκτίρω νιν ἔγωγ᾽, ὅπως,
μή του κηδομένου βροτῶν
μηδὲ σύντροφον ὄμμ᾽ ἔχων,
δύστανος, μόνος αἰεί,
νοσεῖ μὲν νόσον ἀγρίαν,
ἀλύει δ᾽ ἐπὶ παντί τῳ
χρείας ἱσταμένῳ. πῶς ποτε πῶς

[99] In contrast to the actual conditions of Lemnos in antiquity and plays by Aeschylus and Euripides on the same myth: Dio Chrysostom in the *Fifty-Second Discourse 7-8* where he reports that Aeschylus' and Euripides' choruses were composed of Lemnians.

δύσμορος

ἀντέχει; ὦ παλάμαι θεῶν,

ὦ δύστανα γένη βροτῶν,

οἷς μὴ μέτριος αἰών. 169-79

I pity him, in that with *none among mortals to care for him and with no companion* he can look on, miserable, *always alone,* he suffers from a cruel sickness and is bewildered by each need as it arises. *How, how does the unhappy man hold out*? O contrivances of the gods! O unhappy race of mortals to whom life is unkind!

οὗτος πρωτογόνων ἴσως

οἴκων οὐδενὸς ὕστερος,

πάντων ἄμμορος ἐν βίῳ

κεῖται μοῦνος ἀπ᾽ ἄλλων

στικτῶν ἢ λασίων μετὰ

θηρῶν, ἔν τ᾽ ὀδύναις ὁμοῦ

λιμῷ τ᾽ οἰκτρὸς ἀνήκεστ᾽ ἀμερίμνητά τ᾽ ἔχωνβάρη.

ἁ δ᾽ ἀθυρόστομος

Ἀχὼ τηλεφανὴς πικραῖς

οἰμωγαῖς ὑπακούει. 180-90

This man, inferior, perhaps, to none of the houses of the first rank, lies without a share of anything in life, *far from all others,* with beasts dappled or hairy, and *pitiable in his pain* and hunger he endures afflictions incurable and *uncared for*. And she whose mouth has no bar, Echo, appearing far off responds to his bitter cries of lamentation.

Philoctetes throughout the play applies the word *monon,* alone, to his situation,[100] pleading for pity:

ἀλλ᾽ οἰκτίσαντες ἄνδρα δύστηνον, μόνον, 227

but take pity on an unhappy man, alone

He begs not to be left alone at 470 and 799. Isolation is emphasized over and over:

τόδε <μὰν> θαῦμά μ᾽ ἔχει,
πῶς ποτε πῶς ποτ᾽ ἀμφιπλήκτων
ῥοθίων μόνος κλύων, πῶς
ἄρα πανδάκρυτον οὕτω
βιοτὰν κατέσχεν·
ἵν᾽ αὐτὸς ἦν, πρόσουρον οὐκ ἔχων βάσιν,
΄οὐδέ τιν᾽ ἐγ-
χώρων, κακογείτονα,
παρ᾽ ᾧ στόνον ἀντίτυπον <νό
σον> βαρυβρῶτ᾽ ἀποκλαύσειεν
αἱματηρόν·
οὐδ᾽ ὃς θερμοτάταν αἱμάδα κηκιομέναν ἑλκέων
ἐνθήρου ποδὸς ἠπίοισι φύλλοις
κατευνάσειε, <σπασμὸς> εἴ τις ἐμπέσοι,
φορβάδος τι γᾶς ἑλών·
εἶρπε δ᾽ ἄλλοτ᾽ ἀλλ<αχ>ᾷ
τότ᾽ ἂν εἰλυόμενος,
παῖς ἄτερ ὡς φίλας τιθήνας,

[100] 227, 286, 470, 799, 809.

ὅθεν εὐμάρει᾽ ὑπάρχοι

πόρου, ἀνίκ᾽ ἐξανείη

δακέθυμος ἄτα· 686-706

But at this I wonder, how, how did he listen *alone* to the waves that beat the shore around him, and endure a life so full of tears? Where he was *alone*, having *no one* walking near him, nor any inhabitant, a neighbour in his troubles, *beside whom* he could have lamented the sickness that cruelly devoured him, with groans *inviting a response*; nor *any* to lull to sleep with healing herbs the burning flux oozing from the ulcers of his louse-ridden foot, if a spasm should come over him, taking something from the nurturing earth. And he moved this way or that, crawling, *like a child without a loving nurse, searching for his need to be supplied*, when the plague that devoured his mind abated.

The lack of human companionship is mourned above all: repetitions of loneliness and solitary suffering creates an intense emotionalism.

Physical suffering is dramatized in visceral detail but even after Philoctetes' heartrending screams of pain at 742-50 Neoptolemus empathises directly:

δεινόν γε τοὐπίσαγμα τοῦ νοσήματος. 755

The burden of the sickness is grievous!

To which the sufferer appeals for pity:

δεινὸν γὰρ οὐδὲ ῥητόν· ἀλλ᾽ οἴκτιρέ με. 756

Grievous indeed, and indescribable! Come, take pity on me!

Neoptolemus obliges and does not flinch from physical touch:

ἰὼ δύστηνε σύ,

δύστηνε δῆτα διὰ πόνων πάντων φανείς.

βούλῃ λάβωμαι δῆτα καὶ θίγω τί σου; 759-60

Ah, unlucky one! Unlucky you are found to be in every kind of trouble! Do you wish me to take hold of you and hold you?

After further paroxysms of pain, Neoptolemus says,

ἀλγῶ πάλαι δὴ τἀπὶ σοὶ στένων κακά. 806

I have been in pain long since, lamenting for your woes.

Later, when the chorus asks Neoptolemus for directions, his dilemma appears in his answer:

ἐμοὶ μὲν οἶκτος δεινὸς ἐμπέπτωκέ τις

τοῦδ᾽ ἀνδρὸς οὐ νῦν πρῶτον, ἀλλὰ καὶ πάλαι. 965-6

As for me, a strange pity for this man has fallen upon me, not now for the first time, but since long ago.

When the chorus urge Neoptolemus to leave with the bow once Philoctetes is asleep, he refuses, and insists on Philoctetes accompanying them. Philoctetes, on awakening, is abjectly grateful that he has not been abandoned, and that Neoptolemus patiently waited to help him. Neoptolemus now exhorts the older man:

ἀλλ᾽ ἵστω τε καὐτὸς ἀντέχου. 893

Stand up, and hold on to me!

It is at the acme of this moving scene of mutual help and sympathy that Neoptolemus admits to deceit, plunging Philoctetes into confusion and distrust, tellingly revealed in the way he addresses Neoptolemus now as *xenos* instead of *teknon:*

τί μ᾽, ὦ ξένε,

δέδρακας; ἀπόδος ὡς τάχος τὰ τόξα μοι. 923-4

What have you done to me, stranger? Give back my bow at once!

In the subsequent exchanges, Philoctetes becomes increasingly distraught. Determined as he is not to go to Troy, losing the bow means death. His pleas show a mind *in extremis:* suffering the after-pangs of severe pain, robbed of the bow, following so swiftly on the heels of the supreme joy of rescue, he pleads with a silent Neoptolemus:

ἀπεστέρηκας τὸν βίον τὰ τόξ᾽ ἑλών.

ἀπόδος, ἱκνοῦμαί σ᾽, ἀπόδος, ἱκετεύω, τέκνον.

πρὸς θεῶν πατρῴων, τὸν βίον με μὴ ἀφέλῃ.

ὤμοι τάλας. ἀλλ᾽ οὐδὲ προσφωνεῖ μ᾽ ἔτι,

ἀλλ᾽ ὡς μεθήσων μήποθ᾽, ὧδ᾽ ὁρᾷ πάλιν. 931-5

By taking my bow you have deprived me of my life! Give it back, I beg you, give it back, I beseech you, my son! By the gods of your fathers, do not take away my life! Alas for me! But he does not even speak to me any longer, but looks away like this, as though he will never let it go.

Faced with an unresponsive Neoptolemus, Philoctetes apostrophizes the landscape; we shall see that Ajax does the same when confronted by the unresponsive chorus. “Next in emotional power to repetition is apostrophe, a ‘turning away’ from the main tenor of discourse to address some person or thing not directly involved in the action…Apostrophe

is especially apt when a character feels alone in grief."[101] This is hyperbole, excess, but "tragedy flourishes in excess".[102] Repetition, apostrophe, excess, all appear in the *Ajax*.

Philoctetes moves from laments that the loss of the bow will mean his death, to pleas for its return, but he does not threaten harm to himself at this point: he only does so when confronted by his enemy Odysseus and threatened to be taken by force:

> οὐδέποτέ γ᾽· οὐδ᾽ ἢν χρῇ με πᾶν παθεῖν κακόν,
> ἕως γ᾽ ἂν ᾖ μοι γῆς τόδ᾽ αἰπεινὸν βάθρον. 999-1000
> Never! Not even if I must suffer every evil, so long as I have this high pinnacle of the land!

> κρᾶτ᾽ ἐμὸν τόδ᾽ αὐτίκα
> πέτρᾳ πέτρας ἄνωθεν αἱμάξω πεσών. 1002-3
> At once I shall throw myself from the rock and make my head bloody upon the rock below.

Seized when he makes a move towards the edge of the cliff, he accuses Odysseus of abandoning him:

> ἄφιλον ἐρῆμον ἄπολιν ἐν ζῶσιν νεκρόν. 1018
> friendless, deserted, citiless, a corpse among the living!

And literally left for dead:

> ὃς οὐδέν εἰμι καὶ τέθνηχ᾽ ὑμῖν πάλαι. 1030
> me who am nothing to you and have been dead for you long since.

The accusation of cruelty touches Odysseus on the raw and provokes a further cruelty: Philoctetes is not needed, only the bow, and he can be abandoned on his deserted island.

[101] Stanford 1983: 97-8 quoting Philoctetes and Antigone's apostrophe to her tomb at 891-2.
[102] Ibid. 101.

Turning from Odysseus to Neoptolemus (1066-7), then to the chorus (1070-1), Philoctetes is failed by each in turn and once again he apostrophizes the birds and animals and his pending death at their hands (1081-1094). After Odysseus and Neoptolemus depart, when the chorus attempt to persuade him to come with them, he tells them to leave but when they readily agree to go, he begs them to stay, torn between seeking to hold on to the presence of other human beings and wishing his betrayers gone:

ἀπό νύν με λείπετ᾽ ἤδη. 1177

Leave me at once!

μή, πρὸς ἀραίου Διός, ἔλ-

θῃς, ἱκετεύω. 1180-1

Do not go, by Zeus who is invoked in curses, I implore you!

ὦ ξένοι,

μείνατε, πρὸς θεῶν. 1184-5

Strangers, remain, I beg you!

ὦ ξένοι, ἔλθετ᾽ ἐπήλυδες αὖθις. 1190

Strangers, return to be with me once more!

The chorus are confused as Philoctetes keeps changing his purpose. But Philoctetes cannot bear to be alone again and begs for understanding:

οὔτοι νεμεσητὸν

ἀλύοντα χειμερίῳ

λύπᾳ καὶ παρὰ νοῦν θροεῖν. 1193-5

You cannot resent it if a man distraught by storms of pain speaks some words that are insane.

Buffeted on all sides, Philoctetes prays them to give him a sword, an axe, or an arrow to mutilate and kill himself and rejoin his father in Hades; longing for his native city, he reaches the nadir of self-loathing:

ἀρωγός ἔτ᾽ οὐδέν εἰμι. 1217

I am nothing anymore!

Philoctetes could at any time have hurled himself off the cliff if he had been set on death, but his frenzied speech is a further appeal for pity and to keep the chorus with him, to retain human contact for as long as possible.

Philoctetes has often been criticized[103] for not acceding to Neoptolemus' pleas once the bow is returned to him, but faith in the Greeks has long been lost and only exacerbated by Odysseus' latest deceit while his earlier trust in Neoptolemus is shaken; he suspects Neoptolemus is attempting persuasion for his own ends. Philoctetes has not realized that almost all that Neoptolemus had told him was a lie and enquired why Neoptolemus wants to return to Troy when the army had robbed him of the arms of Achilles, and why he is prepared to fight for them (1363-6). On being asked this, Neoptolemus is unable to confess to his lies and is resigned to have failed in persuasion. Philoctetes on his part wants only to go home and is reconciled to permanent suffering:

ἔα με πάσχειν ταῦθ᾽ ἅπερ παθεῖν με δεῖ· 1397

Allow me to suffer what it is my fate to suffer!

Since all trust has been lost in the course of the action, it takes Heracles, now an immortal demi-god, to persuade Philoctetes to accompany Neoptolemus to Troy and fulfil the

[103] For example, Schein 2013:27 Philoctetes' clinging to his epic heroism is self-defeating.

prophecies of Troy's fall. But Sophocles has pushed uncertainty to the extreme: right to the end the audience is kept guessing as to the possible outcome.

There are many similarities between this play and the *Ajax* apart from the recalcitrant protagonists. Both suffer psychologically from their situations and neither is able to trust their immediate fellows. Both suffer abandonment and betrayal by the Greek army and are cheated of items of supreme value (the bow, the arms). The endings differ, prompted in no little part by the two intractable myths (Philoctetes *must* go to Troy, Ajax *must* kill himself). Philoctetes is finally rescued with the assistance of his departed friend, having retained and not compromised his heroic nature.[104] Ajax will be reprieved by Athena after one day but does not know it and chooses death. However, the major difference is the treatment of the protagonists by their immediate interlocutors: the immense empathy displayed by the chorus and Neoptolemus is missing from the responses to Ajax. True, the circumstances differ, and the bloodied, shattered Ajax who greets the chorus at 348-53 more closely resembles Oedipus blinded than the suffering Philoctetes. My point, though, is that Sophocles thoroughly understood the power of empathy, knew how to evoke it and could have written a different response to Ajax if he had wanted to. Instead, he chose to isolate that hero psychologically, much as he physically maroons Philoctetes on a deserted island yet keeps him living and hoping for rescue.

In the extant plays, therefore, Sophocles repeatedly explores the emotionalism of death, suicide, suffering bodies, and corpses. He not only modified myths, as all the playwrights did, he likely innovated the suicides of Deianeira, Antigone, Eurydice and Haemon.[105] Deaths are described in imagined tableaux: the body of Jocasta, the sight of which is followed by her son putting out his eyes; the body of Jocasta's son, Polyneices, lying unburied, putrefying and polluting the holy altars; her daughter, Antigone kneeling over the corpse, crying out like a bird; Antigone's dead body embraced by the dying

[104] Biggs 1966: 235.
[105] Seidensticker 1983 pp.108-9, quoted in Van Hoof 1990: 149.

Haemon. Then there are those tableaux that are depicted onstage: the dead Haemon in the arms of his father, Eurydice's impaled corpse on the *ekkyklema*, the impaled Deianeira also on the *ekkyklema* with her son weeping over her; the agonized Heracles tearing off his clothes to reveal his wrecked body to the chorus and carried away to his death, Philoctetes' agonized cries in a physical suffering matched by the acute psychic pain of abandonment, grief, rejection and loneliness.

But of all the bodies in Sophocles, it is the body of the eponymous Ajax that dominates his play: from the blood-soaked disgraced warrior among the slaughtered animals, to the impaled body which lies on stage throughout the second half and is removed for burial rites at the end. Here are no multiple human bodies, only one, dominant in its presence, even in death.

Another theme that connects our suffering Sophoclean protagonists is isolation: Heracles is isolated by physical pain, Ajax by psychological pain, forcing both to turn inward, and therefore unable to fully acknowledge or empathize with loved ones. Both long for the release of death. Philoctetes has been physically isolated but in his long years of abandonment he has learned to live with the pain of his wound and is saved by finally connecting with empathetic human beings.[106] Deianeira is isolated by her unwitting actions, the unbearable knowledge of the suffering she has caused and her estrangement from husband and son. Once immured in her tomb in complete isolation, Antigone chooses death to rejoin her family in Hades. Eurydice seeks that too, leaving Creon in complete isolation at the end, calling out for his own death.

1.8 Performance Reception Studies

In the past three decades, performance reception studies have burgeoned. Crucial to this has been the setting up of the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama in

[106] Biggs 1966: 231. "…companionship is consistently associated with the cure of the sufferer (167f., 195, 280ff.), foreshadowing Heracles' speech at the end of the play (1422f., 1436f.)."

Oxford in 1996, which has enabled the systematic study of performances. Some key texts studying individual plays include Fiona Macintosh's 2009 *Sophocles: Oedipus Tyrannus* tracing the history of the *OT* and the various incarnations of its titular hero in political, psychoanalytical and post-modern versions, and the varying emphasis on the parricide, incest and regicide of the original.

Medea in Performance 1500-2000 published in 2000 traces the later metamorphoses of Medea into witch, child-killer, abandoned wife, foreigner and proto-feminist within stage performances, ballet, opera, burlesque during this period and in different countries. *Agamemnon in Performance, 458 BC to AD2004* published in 2005 does the same. Kathleen Riley's *The Reception and Performance of Euripides' Herakles: Reasoning Madness* in 2008 traces the differing views and treatments of the madness of Heracles including Seneca's megalomaniac Heracles, and the heroic virtue and madness of the Renaissance Heracles. Edith Hall's *Adventures with Iphigenia in Tauris* in 2013 performs "a cultural history of Euripides' Black Sea tragedy" over the terrains and impacts of this play in multiple genres. *Antigone on the Contemporary World Stage* 2011 edited by Mee and Foley is a collection of essays on the multiple manifestations of *Antigone*, the most popular of Sophocles plays in modern times.

On the *Ajax*, Jon Hesk's 2003 volume in the Bloomsbury *Companions to Greek and Roman Tragedy* series is a detailed study of the play's issues with its final chapter discussing the reception. Martina Treu in the 2017 *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Sophocles* surveys the Sophoclean Ajax in both its heroic and anti-heroic manifestations across the genres of art and literature generally. The recent 2018 book length treatment by Timothy Dugan in *The Many Lives of Ajax: the Trojan War Hero from Antiquity to Modern Times* looks at "the persistence of Ajax derivatives across the breadth of the

western archive"[107] in myriad sources including Sophocles, and in diverse media such as advertising, sport, software and comics.

My own exploration in this thesis is more modest. I argue that the emotional power of the language, and dramatic depiction of suicide in *Ajax* are explicable both within their ancient Greek contexts and within our contemporary context, suggesting that psychological pain can be depicted in ways which offers perspectives that transcend the specificity of cultures and contingent historical change. Focusing on the emotionalism of Sophocles' *Ajax* and the psychological underpinnings of the suicide, I follow the suicide motif post-Sophocles through the following centuries up to the Early Modern period. Subsequently I study a number of theatrical productions of the *Ajax* in the Anglophone world, but the thesis is not intended as a comprehensive reception history of the play. The productions have been selected precisely because they further illuminate the treatment of suicide in Sophocles' play, even where in my view they misunderstand and misrepresent it. The thesis is about Sophocles' Ajax as a man who commits suicide. It is not and does not claim to be an exhaustive treatment of either the play or its afterlife in performance.

[107] Dugan 2018: 2.

Chapter 2

The Mythical Tradition before Sophocles' *Ajax*

Sophocles' *Ajax* is a carefully constructed and psychologically convincing depiction of suicide. A close examination of the play reveals a coherence of image, motive, action, desire and outcome around suicide as I shall argue in the next chapter. Yet the manner in which Sophocles achieves this appears to have required a radical re-working of the mythological sources, or at the very least an original approach using known elements.

In this chapter, in order to prepare for our direct approach to the Sophoclean text in the following chapter, I want to establish evidence for how Sophocles was creating innovation in the mythical tradition. I am therefore going to examine both literary and iconographical evidence in the Greek tradition prior to Sophocles' *Ajax*, but with a particular focus on the elements in the plot of Sophocles in which my suicide-based approach is most interested. These elements include: the madness, the attempt on the lives of the Greek commanders, the slaughter of the animals, the roles of the chorus and Tecmessa as well as Eurysaces, the deception scene, the enmity of Athena, the denial of burial and the role of Odysseus. This chapter will therefore focus on the canonical elements of the myth *before* Sophocles and be prefaced by a brief discussion of the likely date of the play, the earliest of which will act as the cut-off date for the canonical elements of the myth before Sophocles.

2.1 Dating of Sophocles' *Ajax*

I am convinced by the arguments of e.g. Edith Hall that there is no basis for the assumption that *Ajax* is a particularly early play, and indeed that its portrayal of the Spartans seems far more appropriate to the atmosphere in Athens during the

Peloponnesian War.[1] Although I believe that a date at the height of the enmity between Athens and Sparta during the Peloponnesian War is likely, and there is a strong sophistic streak in the arguments used in the second half of the play, which suggests a date after the mid-fifth century,[2] there is no scholarly consensus on the likely date of the play. Only two of Sophocles' plays have been securely dated: *Philoctetes* to 409 and *Oedipus at Colonus* posthumously in 401. Sophocles' career in the theatre is estimated to have begun between 473 to 470, thus *Ajax* could theoretically have been produced any time within eight decades of the fifth century. The use of the skene probably puts *Ajax* no earlier than 466, when it is conjectured the skene would have first been in use, but there has been no success in establishing a more precise date, even through the use of linguistic analysis.[3] Rather than seeking precise historical references, either to events or to individuals, more is to be gained from Peter Rose's reading of the play in the context of broad socio-cultural and political trends in democratic Athens.[4]

For my purposes, therefore, I shall be looking at the mythic, epic and tragic elements governing the figure of Ajax prior to around 470 when Sophocles began his career, but also taking into account also Aeschylus' trilogy on Ajax, that is, *The Award of the Arms,* the *Thracian Women* (in which a messenger reports Ajax's suicide offstage) and *Women of Salamis.* While this trilogy has not been securely dated, it was almost certainly produced before Sophocles' *Ajax*.

2.2 Pre-Sophoclean Iconography of Ajax

Representations of Ajax appear as early as the eighth century and may derive from various sources and versions of the myth including folktales, epic poetry, even painting. Given the paucity of the evidence, the further back we go the harder it is to link images to

[1] Hall 2018: 30-1.
[2] See Stanford 1949: 46-52.
[3] Finglass 2011: 1-11.
[4] Rose 1995.

specific epics. Pottery images as recorded in the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*[5] depict Ajax in many guises, not all of which are specifically Homeric: departing for war, in combat against Aeneas and Hector, taking part in councils of war, and in the embassy to Achilles. Single combat with Hector was popular, sometimes over the body of Patroclus. However the largest number of images associate Ajax with Achilles: ninety-two out of the 194 recorded in a 2006 study by Camiz and Ferrazza,[6] of a corpus of 194 images of Ajax on 189 artefacts from Greece and pre-Roman Italy collated from LIMC, Boardman and other publications. These depict Ajax carrying the body of Achilles from the battlefield and of the two heroes playing dice, while Kowalzig counts 168 depictions (of c. 540-480) of the latter.[7] Next in number in the Camiz and Ferrazza study, at forty, are images of the suicide: this one image is consistently associated with Ajax. As Gantz notes: "Aias is the only figure in mythology known to have thrown himself on his sword, so that the surprisingly large corpus of such representations all presumably illustrate this story."[8]

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An ithyphallic Geometric Greek bronze figure circa 720-700 (illustrated here), wielding a knife against himself, is identified by Jenkins as "... the earliest representation of the death of Ajax and, as such, the first certain identification of an epic hero in Geometric bronze working."[9] Others including Finglass[10] find this less compelling, with Snodgrass suggesting that, for the eighth century, a "heroic ambience" rather than precise scenes

[5] Touchefeu 1981 *LIMC* Volume 1, 312-336.
[6] Camiz and Ferrazza 2006.
[7] Kowalzig 2006: 87-8.
[8] Gantz 1993: 633.
[9] Jenkins 2002: 153-6 at p 153 and Plate 41.
[10] Finglass 2011: 29 fn 79.

from epic, is perhaps all we can hope for, especially in vase-painting.[11] But the attribution is persuasive since Ajax is indeed the only known epic hero to kill himself.

The suicide, strikingly, is most often a stand-alone image. From the seventh or early sixth centuries we have a bronze impaled Ajax in the Ashmolean Museum,[12] and an unfinished metope from Foce del Sele, Paestum, depicting Ajax, impaled on his sword, facing right.[13] A famous departure from the pictorial representations of an impaled Ajax is the black-figure Attic amphora by Exekias dated to 540, depicting Ajax kneeling beneath a palm tree on the left, planting his sword in a mound, his armour and spears resting to the right.[14] This studies the moment *before* the act of suicide: no frenzied madness, but deliberation and care in planting the sword, invite questions on the state of mind of this Ajax. Along the same lines is a red-figure lekythos of about 460 on which the figure kneels next to the planted sword, holding up his hands to the sky.[15] A relief of the impaled Ajax at the Copenhagen Glyptothek is dated to 530;[16] another, in bronze, this time with the sword entering his left armpit, echoing Aeschylus' version of his death, is dated to between 470 to 450.[17]

Where other figures are depicted around the corpse, conflict appears: a relief of the impaled Ajax from Olympia, dated 600-575, depicts two warriors arguing across his body[18]; a Corinthian krater dated 600 with the impaled figure in the centre while two armed warriors duel above him[19]; the same scene is depicted on another Corinthian aryballos of an impaled Ajax dated to 600. The suicide and its aftermath—that is, the discovery of the body—trigger emotion and conflict, and that pathos and drama may have

[11] Snodgrass 1979: 118-30.
[12] Touchefeu 1981 *LIMC* Volume 1, 330.125.
[13] Ibid. 1,331.128.
[14] Ibid. 1,329.104.
[15] Basel, referred to in Gantz 1993: 634.
[16] Touchefeu 1981 *LIMC* Volume 1,331.129.
[17] Ibid. 1, 331.133.
[18] Ibid. 1,331.127.
[19] Ibid. 1,330.120.

prompted their depiction in art. Thus in a black-figure Corinthian cup by the Cavalcade painter dated to about 580[20], Ajax lies, facing left, with the sword through the middle, while two older men – Nestor, Phoenix – face each across his body (given their age and status in Homer, they give the impression of mediators), and other figures named as Agamemnon, Odysseus, Diomedes, Teucer and the lesser Ajax are present.

The quarrel over the arms, the subsequent judgment and the suicide account for about half of the extant images collected in *LIMC*. In most versions of the quarrel over the arms of Achilles, two men with drawn swords are held apart by others; where the arms are included, this assists the interpretation. Often, a third figure appears between them – Athena, Agamemnon. In one version, one man has drawn his sword, while his antagonist has turned to flee. The quarrel's potential for depicting agonistic, competitive verbal performances and movement could have made it attractive to vase painters or appealed to symposiasts for the same reason. However, there is a version on an Attic *pelike* that has Odysseus speaking on a podium while Ajax listens and the arms lie on the ground.[21] In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus only says "beside the ships we disputed our cases for the arms of Achilles" (XI.545-5), leaving it open whether this was purely a rhetorical contest, as Ovid later portrays it, or involved some manner of physical competition or conflict. That very ambiguity is put to good use by the vase painters.

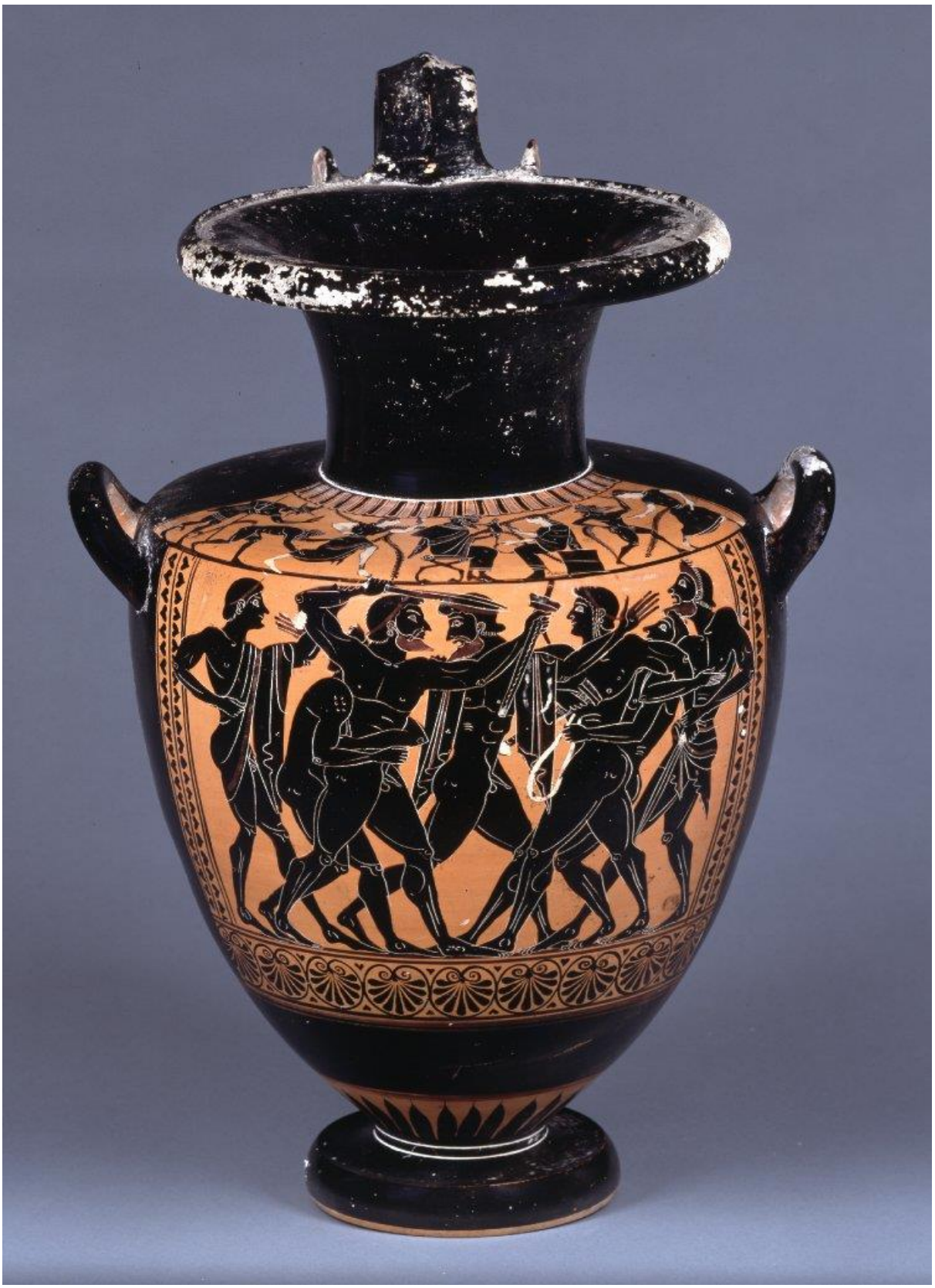
It is not clear if these scenes of aggression took place *before* or *after* the judgment of the arms. Often these two scenes are juxtaposed on the same vase. There is nothing in the sources to suggest that the contest for the arms was so fierce that it came to blows between Ajax and Odysseus and thus necessitated the judgment. More likely the violence depicted occurs after the judgment with Ajax attacking his triumphant adversary. It is important to note that there is no hint here that Ajax was attacking the commanders: the

[20] Ibid. 1,330.122.
[21] Ibid. 1,326.80.

figure of Agamemnon we have on one vase suggests an attempt to separate the foes and prevent the aggression rather than being the target of one of the adversaries.

A red-figure vase E13 from the British Museum variously dated (in *LIMC* to 530-510, and in the museum archives to 520-10) shows two men with drawn swords, restrained by men on each side, with a figure in the middle, arms raised to separate the two.

A black figure attic hydria from the British Museum dated to 520, shows a similar group of figures, though the attribution is less certain.



Vase E69 by the Brygos Painter (dated variously 490-480) from the British Museum contains scenes of both the conflict and the judgment. On one side, two men with drawn swords are being restrained while a figure in the middle with outstretched arms separates them.

The other side depicts a scene of voting with Odysseus on the left, Athena presiding over the votes, and Ajax on the right, clutching his head in despair. One can count the pellets, twenty on the left, eleven on the right: this is an open ballot and the pellet count drives Ajax to despair.

We know this is the *krisis hoplon* because the arms are depicted under the handles, helmet and greaves.

A similar version attributed to the same painter now in the Getty museum and dated to 490 omits the arms, yet can be argued to be the same version of the myth, since the tondo depicts Ajax lying on his back, the sword protruding from his chest, while a woman, usually identified as Tecmessa though she is not named here, prepares to lay a cloak over him. This is a significant departure from the male figures confronting each other across the body. With the key scenes of the conflict and the judgment on the outside of the cup, and the votes almost equal, yet with the arms omitted, one imagines the drinkers at a symposium guessing at the myth from examining the scenes outside the cup with the answer revealed only after the wine is consumed. This may also explain the

different positioning of the body face up from the more accepted version of an Ajax impaled face down on the sword.

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Similar to the above vases by the Brygos painter is a vase in Vienna by the Douris Painter (dated between 500 and 450), in which two armed contestants are separated by a

draped figure and restrained by others while the arms lie in the centre. On the other side of the vase, Athena presides over a scene of voting.[22]

Some eight such vases have been examined by D. Williams,[23] who concludes that this spate of similar scenes likely derived from a common source, either literary or a painting, signifying a renewed interest in Ajax around 520 to 480, possibly in line with political developments. The shift to depicting a judgment by voting would have been popular around the time of the reforms of Cleisthenes and the rising democracy. Ajax was one of the ten eponymous heroes of the re-visioned Athenian polis in the late sixth century and received hero cult status in Attica.[24] As we shall see below, the question of corrupt votes figures in the poetry of Pindar. Sophocles mentions the possibility of corrupt votes (*Aj.* 1135-7) but his Ajax simply lays the blame for the loss of the arms on the commanders; when Menelaus argues it was votes of the army that gave the verdict (1136), Teucer counters with an accusation of vote rigging (1137).

As for the aftermath of the contest, we have only one possible fragmentary reference to the slaughtered cattle: parts of a vase by the Onesimos painter, active around 510 to 490, reproduced in Williams.[25] If this was part of the received story as suggested by epic fragments (see below) it was not often depicted.

It is instructive, therefore, to consider what we do *not* possess in terms of pictorial art. Firstly, we do not possess vase depictions of the madness of Ajax. It is true that this may have been difficult to depict in any case in a myth where there are no figures similar to the *Erinyes* to provide clues. For instance, there are no images in which an Athena figure stands over a distressed Ajax. In the examples above when both combatants are present, psychological distress is depicted with Ajax clutching and bowing his head as

[22] Touchefeu 1981 *LIMC* Volume 1, 325.71.
[23] Williams, D. 1980.
[24] Kearns 1989: 141.
[25] Williams, D. 1980: plate 33.

the votes go against him. One could also plausibly read murderous fury in the scenes where groups of men restrain two contestants, a fury directed at the opponent.

Secondly, there are no images depicting a covert attack on the commanders, which would surely offer a dramatic idea ripe for depiction if this was part of the more familiar story line of the myth. Scenes of men standing over the corpse in the suicide's aftermath could signal discovery and dismay as much as conflict. The *cause* of the suicide arises from the conflict over the arms and Ajax's losing the contest rather than any attack on the commanders.

Thirdly, while Athena appears often presiding over the judgment, there is nothing to suggest her personal enmity towards Ajax or championship of Odysseus in the judgment of the arms. Indeed, Athena appears quite often in other contexts actually *supportive* of Ajax. For example, in an Attic red-figure cup,[26] dated to about 480, Athena stands behind Ajax as he faces Hector, who is supported by Apollo. However some scholars maintain that Ajax was hated by the gods, and it is tempting to see in this a retrospective reading of the art informed by both the epic cycle as discussed below and Sophocles' *Ajax*, which became the canonical reading after its production.[27]

In the pictorial art, the connection with Achilles is strong, especially Ajax and Achilles at play. The iconic depiction is of Exekias' black-figure rendering of the seated warriors engrossed in a board game. This was popular, even though the scene was not portrayed in our extant Homeric epics. Many depictions, also referring to a non-Homeric scene, are those of Ajax carrying the dead body of Achilles; this we shall see becomes part of the argument of the merits of the contenders for the arms.

[26] Touchefeu 1981 *LIMC* Volume 1,319.37.
[27] For instance Nisetich 1989: 78 Footnote 14.

The irreducible information to be inferred from the visual evidence, then, is that the arms were contested, and won by Odysseus, in a vote which resulted in murderous aggression, a death by suicide, attempts (by Tecmessa?) to cover the body and its subsequent discovery. Athena's enmity, the madness, and the attack on the commanders do not appear at all in the surviving evidence.

2.3 The Literary Tradition on the Myth of Ajax before Sophocles

Athenaeus, in the 2nd century CE, comments that the fundamental myths that Sophocles chose to dramatise came from cyclical epics dealing with Troy, Thebes and Heracles' labours: he writes that

> ἔχαιρε δὲ Σοφοκλῆς τῷ ἐπικῷ κύκλῳ, ὡς καὶ ὅλα δράματα ποιῆσαι κατακολουθῶν τῇ ἐν τούτῳ μυθοποιίᾳ, *Deipnosophistai* 277c
>
> Sophocles took great pleasure in the Epic Cycle and composed whole dramas in which he followed the Cycle's version of myths.[28]

Eight poems made up the Trojan cycle, of which the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* formed part. The remaining books are lost and only the summary of them by the Byzantine Proclus, and other tantalizing fragments, remain. The exact dates of Proclus are not known, but may not be relevant as Proclus appears to be reproducing material of Hellenistic or Roman Imperial date since his summaries agree with sources of this period, especially Apollodorus.[29]

2.3.1 Homer

The depiction of Ajax in the *Iliad* is in many ways the opposite of Sophocles': Ajax is pious, favoured by the gods, an indomitable fighter and second only to Achilles in his

[28] Translated by Davies 1989: 1.
[29] West 2003: 12.

qualities. He is not wanting in diplomacy either, forming part of the embassy to Achilles in Book IX and making a persuasive appeal to the recalcitrant hero (IX.624-42): a far cry from later depictions of a brawny but tongue-tied hero. Yet episodes like his loss and draw with Odysseus in the funeral games for Patroclus in Book XXIII may foreshadow later events.

The encounter of Odysseus with Ajax in the underworld in the *Odyssey* alludes indirectly to the conflict of the arms and the suicide. In *Odyssey* XI.469, Odysseus himself describes Ajax as second only to Achilles in beauty and stature, echoing the *Iliad*.[30] Ajax is one of a group of heroes – others being Achilles, Patroclus and Antilochos – who approach Odysseus. After conversing with Achilles, the other heroes crowd around Odysseus and speak to him:

> "αἱ δ᾽ ἄλλαι ψυχαὶ νεκύων κατατεθνηώτων
> ἔστασαν ἀχνύμεναι, εἴροντο δὲ κήδε᾽ ἑκάστη.
> οἴη δ᾽ Αἴαντος ψυχὴ Τελαμωνιάδαο
> νόσφιν ἀφεστήκει, κεχολωμένη εἵνεκα νίκης,
> τήν μιν ἐγὼ νίκησα δικαζόμενος παρὰ νηυσὶ
> τεύχεσιν ἀμφ᾽ Ἀχιλῆος· ἔθηκε δὲ πότνια μήτηρ.
> παῖδες δὲ Τρώων δίκασαν καὶ Παλλὰς Ἀθήνη.
>
> *Od.* XI.541-548

> And the other ghosts of those dead and gone stood sorrowing, and each asked about those dear to him. Alone of them all the spirit of Aias, son of Telamon, stood apart, still full of wrath for the victory that I had won over him in the contest by the ships for the arms of Achilles, whose honored mother had set them for a prize; and the judges were the sons of the Trojans and Pallas Athene.[31]

> "'Αἶαν, παῖ Τελαμῶνος ἀμύμονος, οὐκ ἄρ᾽ ἔμελλες

[30] This is repeated at *Odyssey XXIV17-8*.
[31] All translations of the *Odyssey* by A. T. Murray in Loeb Classics.

οὐδὲ θανὼν λήσεσθαι ἐμοὶ χόλου εἵνεκα τευχέων
οὐλομένων; 553-5
"'Aias, son of flawless Telamon, were you then not even in death to forget your wrath against me because of those accursed arms?

……..σεῖο δ᾽ Ἀχαιοὶ
ἶσον Ἀχιλλῆος κεφαλῇ Πηληϊάδαο
ἀχνύμεθα φθιμένοιο διαμπερές· οὐδέ τις ἄλλος
αἴτιος…… 556-9
and for you in death we Achaeans sorrow unceasingly, as much as we do for the life of Achilles, son of Peleus.

This attempt at reconciliation suggests Odysseus' remorse for his part, but the mourning for the dead Ajax, even if exaggerated, contains no hint of any animosity from either the commanders or the army for an attack against them. And while Ajax's suicide is referred to allusively at XI.549, no particular opprobrium appears to attach to this suicide and certainly no hint of any scandalous attack on the commanders. The suicide would have been well known enough to have been merely alluded to in order to be understood.

The lines are self-exculpatory: while expressing regret at the outcome, Odysseus appears to excuse his part in the conflict by claiming that the outcome is not the result of his actions but of Athena, the Trojans and ultimately Zeus. Firstly (this is part of the recital but not addressed to Ajax) the sons of the Trojans, with Pallas Athene: a scholiast on the *Odyssey* says this refers to Trojan prisoners of war.[32] Finally, though, this was the plan of Zeus himself in his hatred for the Danaans: 559—60. This emphatic reiteration may address versions that more directly laid the responsibility on Odysseus himself. The effect however is to cast Ajax as in some manner the victim of the gods.

[32] Scholiast HVQ on *Od.* XI.547; Davies 1989: 58.

It bears repeating that Sophocles' Ajax goes to his death declaring that he would speak loudly in the underworld (864-5), though Homer portrays, in Odysseus' recital, a silent, hostile Ajax at *Od* XI.563-4.

2.3.2 The Epic Cycle outside Homer

There are references to the Ajax myth in several fragments of the poems of the Epic Cycle, including texts of the *Aethiopis*, the *Little Iliad* and the *Sack of Troy.* The dating of these poems of the Epic Cycle is controversial: they may have been composed post-Homer to explain and fill in the "before" and "after" of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey,* in support of which, Malcolm Davies[33] points out that the Epic Cycle uses linguistic forms that are late and post-Homeric. However the *texts* of the cycle may have been written down later while re-working the same themes from an earlier oral tradition. Another possibility is that the Epic Cycle developed independently of Homer. Jonathan Burgess[34] examines the evidence and suggests that "All available evidence indicates that myth about the Trojan War in general was known from the late eighth century onwards; on the other hand, probable evidence for knowledge of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* does not exist until late in the seventh century."[35] This may explain pictorial images of Ajax that do not illustrate episodes in the Homeric epics but may depict other versions.

Homer was likely to have been composing against the background of an extensive and well known tradition of stories about the Trojan War, thus allowing him to position his stories within a wide canvas against which he spins his own version and vision that constantly alludes to, challenges and contrasts with other versions. Such re-imagining could only be achieved within a strong oral tradition in which stories of the Epic Cycle

[33] Davies 1989:3.
[34] Burgess 2001.
[35] Burgess 2001: 128.

were well known. As Burgess says: "Homeric allusions to events from the whole war assume that the audience knows the story of the whole war."[36] If as he proposes, the poems of the Epic Cycle were not dependent on Homer but were largely traditional, then they present a picture of the material that Homer drew on to create his own distinctive vision. "The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* can hardly be fully appreciated without a strong awareness of the larger tradition of the Trojan War."[37] This is how the initial audiences would have appreciated them, but since only fragments remain of the poems of the Epic Cycle, it presents problems in understanding how the tragedians re-worked their material. That they did was incontrovertible and indeed, it could be argued that the tragedians were carrying on in the tradition of robust re-imagining and re-visioning that we encounter in Homer.

How much of the Epic Cycle texts were known in the fifth century? How much of the oral tradition was still alive at that time? These are questions whose answers are beyond recovery, but the allusive reference in Homer to Ajax's death suggests that his suicide was definitely part of this larger tradition by the eighth century.

Davies suggests that the texts of the Epic Cycle, being relatively late, "gradually assumed the status of sequels to or anticipations of the Homeric epics. By the time they took on the stable and permanent form of which we possess fragmentary knowledge, they would have been accurately termed 'post-Homeric'."[38] It is with these, fragments some of which refer to Ajax, that we have to deal.

[36] Ibid. 147.
[37] Ibid. 175.
[38] Davies 1989: 5.

In the *Aethiopis* the death of Achilles would have constituted the climax, with his funeral games following, of which the contest for the arms would have formed part.[39] Proclus' summary of the *Aethiopis* ends with the reference to the conflict over the arms.

> καὶ περὶ τῶν Ἀχιλλέως ὅπλων Ὀδυσσεῖ καὶ Αἴαντι στάσις ἐμπίπτει.
> And a quarrel arises between Odysseus and Ajax over the arms of Achilles.
> Fragment 6 Scholiast on Pindar *Isth.* 4.58b:
>
> ὁ γὰρ τὴν Αἰθιοπίδα γράφων περὶ τὸν ὄρθρον φησὶ τὸν Αἴαντα ἑαυτὸν ἀνελεῖν.
> For the author of the *Aethiopis* says that Ajax killed himself towards dawn.[40]

The conflict over the arms becomes the first event related in the *Little Iliad*. This is fragment 1 in Proclus' *Chrestomathy*, with additions and variants from Apollodorus, *The Library*:

> ἑξῆς δ' ἐστὶν Ἰλιάδος Μικρᾶς βιβλία τέσσαρα Λέσχεω Μυτιληναίου περιέχοντα τάδε·
>
> (1) ἡ τῶν ὅπλων κρίσις γίνεται καὶ Ὀδυσσεὺς κατὰ βούλησιν Ἀθηνᾶς λαμβάνει. Αἴας δ' ἐμμανὴς γενόμενος τήν τε λείαν τῶν Ἀχαιῶν λυμαίνεται καὶ ἑαυτὸν ἀναιρεῖ. <Ἀγαμέμνων δὲ κωλύει τὸ σῶμα αὐτοῦ καῆναι· καὶ μόνος οὗτος τῶν ἐν Ἰλίωι ἀποθανόντων ἐν σορῶι κεῖται. ὁ δὲ τάφος ἐστὶν ἐν Ῥοιτείωι. >
>
> "Next are the four books of the *Little Iliad* by Lesches of Mytilene, with the following content: (1) The awarding of the armour takes place, and Odysseus gets it in accord with Athena's wishes. Ajax goes insane, savages the Achaeans' plundered livestock, and kills himself. <Agamemnon prevents his body being cremated; he is the only one of those who died at Ilion to lie in a coffin. His tomb is at Rhoiteion.>"[41] (The last sentence is from Apollodorus.)

In the summary, Athena is responsible for the award of the arms to Odysseus. A scholiast on Aristophanes' *Knights* adds to the account in Fragment 2 (2 Schol. Ar. Eq. 1056a):

[39] West 2003: 14.
[40] Translated West 2003: 117.
[41] Translated West 2003: 121.

διεφέροντο περὶ τῶν ἀριστείων ὅ τε Αἴας καὶ ὁ Ὀδυσσεύς, ὥς φησιν ὁ τὴν Μικρὰν Ἰλιάδα πεποιηκώς· τὸν Νέστορα δὲ συμβουλεῦσαι τοῖς Ἕλλησι πέμψαι τινὰς ἐξ αὐτῶν ὑπὸ τὰ τείχη τῶν Τρώων ὠτακουστήσοντας περὶ τῆς ἀνδρείας τῶν προειρημένων ἡρώων. τοὺς δὲ πεμφθέντας ἀκοῦσαι παρθένων διαφερομένων πρὸς ἀλλήλας, ὧν τὴν μὲν λέγειν ὡς ὁ Αἴας πολὺ κρείττων ἐστὶ τοῦ Ὀδυσσέως, διερχομένην οὕτως·

Αἴας μὲν γὰρ ἄειρε καὶ ἔκφερε δηϊοτῆτοςἥρω Πηλείδην, οὐδ᾽ ἤθελε δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς. τὴν δὲ ἑτέραν ἀντειπεῖν Ἀθηνᾶς προνοίαι·

πῶς ἐπεφωνήσω; πῶς οὐ κατὰ κόσμον ἔειπες;

καί κε γυνὴ φέροι ἄχθος, ἐπεί κεν ἀνὴρ ἀναθείη,5ἀλλ᾽ οὐκ ἂν μαχέσαιτο.

Ar. Eq. 1056–1057

"There was a dispute over the prize for valour between Ajax and Odysseus, as the author of the *Little Iliad* says, and Nestor advised the Greeks to send some men to below the Trojans' wall to eavesdrop concerning the bravery of the heroes in question. They heard some girls arguing, one of whom said that Ajax was much better than Odysseus, explaining:

Ajax, after all, lifted up the warrior son of Peleus and carried him out of the fighting, but noble Odysseus would not.

But the other retorted, by the providence of Athena,

What did you say? How can you be so wrong? Even a woman could carry a load, if a man put it onto her, but she couldn't fight."[42]

By the second woman being instigated by Athena, this is regarded as another example of the result foreordained by the gods. The tale itself appears more in keeping with a comic source such as Aristophanes.

In another reference to the burial, rather than cremation, of this epic hero, in a fragment of Porphyry's commentary on Homer, itself quoted in Eustathius:

3 Porph. (= *Paralip.* fr. 4 Schrader [1880-2]) ap. Eust. 285.34

[42] Translated West 2003: 126-7. Schrader (1880-2, ed.) *Porphyrii Quaestionum homericarum ad Iliadem pertinentium reliquias collegit disposuit*.

> ὁ τὴν Μικρὰν Ἰλιάδα γράψας ἱστορεῖ μηδὲ καυθῆναι συνήθως τὸν Αἴαντα, τεθῆναι δὲ οὕτως ἐν σορῶι διὰ τὴν ὀργὴν τοῦ βασιλέως.
>
> "The writer of the *Little Iliad* records that Ajax was not cremated in the usual way either, but placed in a coffin as he was, because of the king's anger."[43]

The reason for this anger is not stated. In the absence of any other evidence of an attack on the commanders, reading such a motive into the king's anger in this fragment could "represent a relatively late rationalisation"[44] post-Sophocles. Burying the corpse could also be related to the taboos around suicide and possible different treatment meted out to their bodies in this period.[45] However I am persuaded by Holt,[46] who argues that the anachronistic feature of Ajax's burial is related to his antiquity in mythical time and helps to date him. Cremation, followed by burial of the bones, was standard for epic heroes. There was no difference in *honour* between burial and cremation, the difference was one of time periods: inhumation was the predominant Mycenaean Bronze Age practice, while the shift to cremation took place hundreds of years later, even while there are periods when both practices overlapped.

> "…cremation was an iron-age development which displaced in part the usual Mycenaean practice. Everybody we know of in epic was cremated-everybody but Ajax. The most reasonable explanation for Ajax's inhumation, then, is that Ajax is an old hero in the epic tradition. The figure of Ajax and some of the stories about him went back to Mycenaean times. His death and funeral must have been important parts of the tradition about him, so firmly embedded in that tradition that epic singers felt reluctant to change them to conform to the new fashions.

[43] Translated West 2003: 127.
[44] Davies 1989: 62-3.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Holt 1992.

> Generations of singers kept on burying Ajax even after they had taken to cremating everybody else."[47]

Ajax's antiquity is also traceable in his armour and weapons, which appear to date from the Mycenaean period. In particular, his enormous oxhide seven-fold shield carried before him like a tower (VII.219), is a survival into epic of the large body-covering shields of Mycenaean times, used by warriors who wore no body armour, while the pike with which Ajax fights on the ship could be related to Mycenaean thrusting-spears rather than the throwing spears of the later ninth and eighth centuries.[48] True, a huge shield is needed to guard the massive bulk of its owner. But it is also often used to guard others, for example, at VII.266ff when Teucer shoots arrows from the shelter of Ajax's shield, or the case of the injured Odysseus in book XI, or the defence of Patroclus' body at XVI.128ff. In book XVIII, Achilles says only Ajax's shield would fit him; he can wear no other's armour, but Ajax wears it already.

Holt concludes: "Thus Ajax's odd funeral is an archaism, like his odd weaponry, and it has a similar explanation: Ajax was an old hero in the epic tradition, and he resisted updating on certain matters where other heroes could be updated quite readily…If the force of tradition preserved Ajax's old-style funeral, that funeral came to look increasingly peculiar as time passed and the epic world changed around Ajax. It called for an explanation, and so somewhere along the line a poet cooked one up: "because of the anger of the king."[49]

Furthermore, Holt differentiates between what he calls the "short version" of Ajax's suicide: contest, loss, immediate suicide against versions which interpolate the madness and slaughter between loss and suicide. The author of the *Little Iliad* is a poem in praise of Odysseus, and sets out to denigrate Ajax and enhance Odysseus. This explains

[47] Ibid. 324-5.
[48] Holt 1992:325.
[49] Ibid. 326.

both the judgment of the Trojan women and the casting of a negative light on the burial. Holt points out that "In art, scenes of the judgment of arms are fairly popular, and scenes of Ajax's suicide are very popular, but there are very few treatments of his madness or the slaughter of the cattle until Roman times. In art as in literature, then, the main events of the myth are those of the short version. It seems quite possible that Ajax's madness and the slaughter of the cattle were optional and dispensable features of the story. The *Little Iliad* could have omitted them; it put them in for a reason, to emphasize Ajax's crimes and enormities and make Odysseus look all the better by contrast. Ajax's burial, that odd heirloom of the epic tradition, was turned into an expression of official disapproval to make Ajax look all the worse."[50]

In the final poem in the Epic Cycle, that is, the *Sack of Troy*, the scholiast on the *Iliad* refers to the healing skills of the sons of Poseidon (not of Asclepius as usually attributed) with Podalirius exceeding in prestige his brother Machaon, for he possessed "knowledge to diagnose what is hidden and to cure what does not get better. He it was who first recognized the raging Ajax's flashing eyes and burdened spirit."[51]

> τῶι δ᾽ ἄρ᾽ ἀκριβέα πάντα ἐνὶ στήθεσσιν ἔθηκενἄσκοπά τε γνῶναι καὶ ἀναλθέα ἰήσασθαι·ὅς ῥα καὶ Αἴαντος πρῶτος μάθε χωομένοιοὄμματά τ᾽ ἀστράπτοντα βαρυνόμενόν τε νόημα.

The reference here is not clear: it could be either to the rage at being denied the arms, or madness, resulting in either the slaughter of animals or the act of suicide. But Podalirius plays no part in Sophocles, and the madness is revealed by Athena who describes is as "darkened vision" (85).

Is Sophocles following the Epic Cycle or is he innovating? It is impossible to answer this question conclusively given the almost complete loss of those epics outside

[50] Ibid. 329-30.
[51] Translated West 2003: 149 Fragment 2.

of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The fragments we possess give tantalizing glimpses of both a long and a short version of the Ajax story. Any longer version apparently did not become either widespread or canonical, given the absence of evidence pre-dating Sophocles. Accordingly, even if Sophocles followed a version that included the attack on the commanders (as Martin West conjectures[52]), this version may not have been widely known, and Sophocles' treatment of this theme in the totality of the play would have been striking. Instead, as I argue below, he set out to differentiate himself as much as possible from his predecessors by challenging and re-visioning the figure of Ajax in a completely different manner. Karakantza studied just this question,[53] and she concluded (a) that Sophocles had skilfully used different elements of the epics, but (b) that his primary comparison was with the Iliadic Achilles. The intertextual elements shared by the play and the *Iliad* have been discussed by many scholars, and Gregory in a recent essay sets out the close links between the Sophoclean Ajax and both the Iliadic Ajax and the Iliadic Achilles.[54] Read in this way, the features of this epic hero which trouble modern audiences and readers (the rage, vengeance, pride, violence) are revealed as far less problematic for the fifth century.

2.3.3 Fifth century treatments prior to Sophocles

Closer in time to Sophocles we have Pindar's *Odes* and Aeschylus' lost trilogy. Pindar, in *Isthmian* 4, composed for a Theban athlete, probably in 474, blames the Greeks for the death of Ajax:

> ἴστε μὰν Αἴαντος ἀλκὰν φοίνιον, τὰν ὀψίᾳ

[52] West 2013.
[53] Karakantza 2010.
[54] Gregory 2017.

ἐν νυκτὶ ταμὼν περὶ ᾧ φασγάνῳ, μομφὰν ἔχει παίδεσσιν Ἑλλάνων ὅσοι Τρῴανδ᾽ ἔβαν. 35-36b

Surely you know of Ajax's bloodstained valour, which he pierced late at night on his own sword, and thereby casts blame upon all the sons of the Hellenes who went to Troy.[55]

But Homer, Pindar recalls, rescues Ajax's reputation:

ἀλλ᾽ Ὅμηρός τοι τετίμακεν δι᾽ ἀνθρώπων, ὃς αὐτοῦ
πᾶσαν ὀρθώσαις ἀρετὰν κατὰ ῥάβδον ἔφρασεν
θεσπεσίων ἐπέων λοιποῖς ἀθύρειν. 37-9

But Homer, to be sure, has made him honoured among mankind, who set straight his entire achievement and declared it with his staff of divine verses for future men to enjoy.[56]

However, in *Nemean* 7,[57] composed for a boy athlete of Aegina, probably in 467, Pindar at lines 15-29, says that Homer's artistry in gilding Odysseus' reputation beyond his actual suffering had blinded the Greeks to Ajax's worth as the second best after Achilles:

…….τυφλὸν δ᾽ ἔχει
ἦτορ ὅμιλος ἀνδρῶν ὁ πλεῖστος. εἰ γὰρ ἦν
ἓ τὰν ἀλάθειαν ἰδέμεν, οὔ κεν ὅπλων χολωθεὶς
ὁ καρτερὸς Αἴας ἔπαξε διὰ φρενῶν
λευρὸν ξίφος: ὃν κράτιστον Ἀχιλέος ἄτερ μάχᾳ… (lines 23-7)

The great majority of men have a blind heart, for if they could have seen the truth, mighty Ajax, in anger over the arms, would not have planted in his chest the smooth sword. Except for Achilles, in battle he was the best...[58]

[55] Pindar *Isthmian* 4 translated Race 1997.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Pindar *Nemean* 7 translated Race 1997.
[58] Ibid.

It is crucial that the aristocratic family of the Aiakidai of Aegina celebrated the feats of Heracles and their ancestor Telamon and had raised the status of Ajax, their eponymous ancestor, in local tradition.[59] Where Ajax was a local hero, he was likely to find himself exonerated. In *Nemean* 8, also composed for an athlete of Aegina, probably in 459, Pindar says that secret votes and envious words which always target the high-born not lesser men (echoes of the chorus in *Ajax*) had devoured Ajax, causing him to turn his sword on himself:

> κεῖνος καὶ Τελαμῶνος δάψεν υἱὸν φασγάνῳ ἀμφικυλίσαις.
> ἦ τιν᾽ ἄγλωσσον μέν, ἦτορ δ᾽ ἄλκιμον, λάθα κατέχει
> ἐν λυγρῷ νείκει: μέγιστον δ᾽ αἰόλῳ ψεύδει γέρας ἀντέταται.
> κρυφίαισι γὰρ ἐν ψάφοις Ὀδυσσῆ Δαναοὶ θεράπευσαν:
> χρυσέων δ᾽ Αἴας στερηθεὶς ὅπλων φόνῳ πάλαισεν. Lines 23-7
>
> It was that [envy] that which feasted on the son of Telamon when it rolled him onto his sword. Truly, oblivion overwhelms many a man whose tongue is speechless, but heart is bold, in a grievous quarrel; and the greatest prize has been offered up to shifty falsehood. For with secret votes the Danaans favoured Odysseus, while Ajax, stripped of the golden armour, wrestled with a gory death.[60]

This Ajax loses out in a contest of words where votes are cast in secret, but is in fact the greater warrior:

> ἦ μὰν ἀνόμοιά γε δᾴοισιν ἐν θερμῷ χροΐ
> ἕλκεα ῥῆξαν πελεμιζόμενοι
> ὑπ᾽ ἀλεξιμβρότῳ λόγχᾳ, τὰ μὲν ἀμφ᾽ Ἀχιλεῖ νεοκτόνῳ,
> ἄλλων τε μόχθων ἐν πολυφθόροις
> ἀμέραις. Lines 28-32
>
> In truth, unequal indeed were the wounds they tore in the warm flesh of their foes with succouring spears when they were hard pressed, both in fighting over Achilles newly slain and the murderous days of their other labours.[61]

[59] See Indergaard 2010.
[60] Pindar *Nemean 8* translated Race 1997.
[61] Pindar *Nemean 7* translated Race 1997.

The accusation of vote-rigging seems to make its first appearance, at least in our surviving sources, here, in a pro-Aeginetan encomium by a Theban poet at a time when Aeginetan-Theban relations were being carefully fostered; the Athenian Sophocles has Teucer make a similar allegation which is fiercely disputed by Menelaus (1136). It suits Pindar's context to put Ajax's reputation beyond doubt by impugning the votes through the manipulation of Odysseus, but, to Sophocles, this seems almost incidental: the issue is raised in the play but not resolved. Ajax believes he has been cheated of the arms by the commanders and once the attempt to kill them is made, there is no going back.

Unsurprisingly, given his customers' attachment to Telamon and Ajax, there is no mention in Pindar of madness and an attack on the commanders. If these were already part of the established tradition, Pindar is not likely to include them in *encomia* to Aeginetan sponsors for whom the odes were composed. However, if an attack on the commanders was part of the established tradition, such an egregious act would have required some kind of explaining away or justification. In addition, the passages in Pindar suggest a sequence of events moving swiftly from contest to award to suicide, the dishonour of the denial of the arms itself the cause of the death, that is, it reflects the short version of the myth. This shorter version also appears to hold good for Aeschylus' treatment of the myth.

Besides Pindar, the most likely source for innovations in the Ajax myth that Sophocles might have been responding to come in the earlier Athenian tragedian, Aeschylus. We have five fragments of his famous *Award of the Arms*, usually regarded as the first play in his Ajax trilogy.[62] The first fragment is an address to Thetis: δέσποινα

[62]Aeschylus: *Fragments* translated by Sommerstein 2009, fragments 174-9.

πεντήκοντα Νηρήδων κορῶν, "Mistress of fifty Nereid maidens."[63] This coincides with Odysseus' statement that the mother of Achilles set the arms as a prize (*Odyssey* XI.547) and could be spoken by either contender.

The second is clearly attributed to Ajax: ἀλλ᾽ Ἀντικλείας ἆσσον ἦλθε Σίσυφος,τῆς σῆς λέγω τοι μητρός, ἥ σ᾽ ἐγείνατο, "But Sisyphus came close to Anticleia – to your mother, I tell you, to her who gave birth to you!"[64] This sentiment is repeated in Sophocles' *Ajax*: 449, 1135-7.

The third fragment declares: ἁπλᾶ γάρ ἐστι τῆς ἀληθείας ἔπη; "The words of truth are simple."[65] This must be Ajax, as is the next fragment: τί γὰρ καλὸν ζῆν †βίον ὃς† λύπας φέρει; "For what honour is there in living a life that brings only pain?"[66] This is likely to have been spoken after the arms had been adjudged to Odysseus, and pre-echoes similar sentiments in Sophocles. The last fragment: καὶ διὰ πλευμόνωνθερμῶν ἄησιν ὕπνον, "And through his fevered lungs he breathes sleep."[67] This fragment is especially tantalizing; is this a fever of anger or of madness?

Based on the above fragments, this first play in Aeschylus' trilogy appears to have dramatized the rival claim to the arms and the contest which was one of argument between the contenders. We do not know who judged and whether and how votes were cast, but we do have Ajax lamenting his loss and falling asleep in some kind of fever.

It can be safely conjectured that Aeschylus did not dramatize the on-stage suicide since it is a scholiast on Sophocles' *Ajax* 813 and 815 who reveals that in Aeschylus'

[63] Ibid. 174.
[64] Ibid. 175.
[65] Ibid. 176.
[66] Ibid. 177.
[67] Ibid. 177a.

second play, *The Thracian Women*, the suicide of Ajax was related by a messenger to a chorus of captive-women. The first fragment:

> καὶ χρωτὸς ἐνδιδόντος οὐδαμοῦ σφαγῇ
> ἔκαμπτε, τόξον ὥς τις ἐντείνων, ξίφος,
> πρὶν δὴ παροῦσα δαιμόνων ἔδειξέ τις.
> And, since his skin would not yield anywhere to the fatal blow, he kept bending his sword, like a man drawing a bow, until some goddess appeared and showed him the place.[68]

This spot was the armpit, the only place where Ajax was vulnerable according to various versions including a reference by Pindar (according to the hypothesis to Sophocles' tragedy).[69]

The presence of an unnamed goddess, not Athena, suggests a version in which the suicide is foreordained, aided by the gods, echoing Odysseus' words to Ajax in the *Odyssey* that Athena judged the arms and the suicide was Zeus' enmity for the Greeks and his aid to the Trojans (*Od* XI.559-60).

The other fragment from *The Thracian Women* would appear to be from a choral song, praising Ajax:

> τρόποι δ' ἀμεμφεῖς, φιλόμουσοι, φιλοσυμπόται
> "And his habits were blameless, fond of music, fond of the symposium."[70]

This paints a rather different picture from that of Sophocles, and there is no suggestion of madness.

The *Women of Salamis* is regarded as the last play in Aeschylus' trilogy. Only tiny fragments remain,[71] but the tragedy most likely dealt with the return of Teucer to

[68] Ibid. fragment 83.
[69] For these references, with discussion, see Kamerbeek 1963: 5.
[70] Sommerstein 2009 fragment 84a.
[71] Ibid. fragments 215a and 216.

Salamis, and the founding of the local hero cult for Ajax,[72] who became especially important for the Athenians after the famous sea-battle there (see Aeschylus' *Persians* 307), when he was believed to have helped the Greeks to victory (see Herodotus 8.65, 121). From this we can conjecture, with Golder,[73] that Aeschylus' trilogy likely exhibited "a redemptive pattern" featuring a "heroic, even divine Ajax". The suicide may have been only one of three equally significant events: contest through rhetorical debate, suicide and redemption via the establishment of hero-cult on Salamis. It is not inconceivable that Aeschylus' version included madness and an attack on the commanders but it seems unlikely.

2.4 Summary

Based on the above investigation, I argue that we can be fairly certain of the following, assuming that both Pindar's odes and Aeschylus' trilogy came before Sophocles' *Ajax*.

First, it is clear that the arms were set as a prize by Thetis (*Odyssey* and Aeschylus' *The Award of the Arms*), claimed by both Ajax and Odysseus and won by the latter. Second, the manner of victory is important in the allocation of responsibility for the outcome: Odysseus was judged the victor by Athena and Trojan captives (*Odyssey*) or by Trojan women influenced by Athena (*Little Iliad*). Alternatively, Odysseus won in a debate with Ajax which was then voted on by the army (Aeschylus' *The Award of the Arms*) either openly (as depicted on vase paintings) or in secret ballot (Pindar). Third, the contest was either before or after the judgment marred by violence and aggression between the contenders (vase paintings), and animals may have been slaughtered (one fragmentary painting, *Little Iliad*). Lastly, after suffering from fever and a burdened spirit

[72] Heath and Okell 2007.
[73] Golder 1990: 13.

(Aeschylus' *The Award of the Arms*, and vase paintings) Ajax kills himself and there is a dispute over his corpse (vase paintings), and the body is buried, not cremated (*Little Iliad*).

However, there is no evidence for the enmity of Athena as portrayed by Sophocles, although she appears as a partisan of Odysseus, and no evidence for an attack on the commanders, only inferences to be drawn from "the anger of the king" in the *Little Iliad*. Ajax kills himself out of shame and despair, from the dishonour inflicted by the denial of the arms (vase paintings). Where the Greek army was involved as judges (vase paintings, Pindar), the ordinary soldiers are not accused of being actively hostile to Ajax as they are in *Ajax* as a result of the attack on the commanders. There is also nothing in the extant sources suggesting the roles in Sophocles played by Ajax's men, Tecmessa (except the vase painting of a woman in the act of covering the corpse which may well have been inspired by Sophocles' version), Eurysaces or Teucer.

The reason why Ajax loses the contest appears to have dictated the treatment of the myth in the fifth century before Sophocles. That is, what was of most concern was the larger question of who was culpable for the self-inflicted death of this great epic hero. Depending on the speaker, reasons ranged from divine enmity, to bringing to fruition an overarching plan by Zeus (Odysseus self-exculpation in the *Odyssey*), or human deceit and the manipulation of votes (Pindar). Aeschylus' *Thracian Women*, the second in his *Aianteia* trilogy, suggests the former, with the goddess appearing to assist the suicide, not to interrupt it. Pindar's treatment provides a more complete paradigm of the manipulation of the votes through deceit, decisively rejecting the versions in the *Little Iliad* and the *Aethiopis*: "Ajax in both versions appears as a victim of divine enmity. Odysseus accordingly bears little if any personal responsibility for the defeat of his rival, whose madness and suicide become, under the circumstances, more pathological than tragic."[74]

[74] Nisetich 1989: 17.

For Nisetich, this provided the impetus for Pindar to shift all blame to Odysseus and to evoke the spirit of envy that called forth the secret votes, resulting in Ajax being deprived of the arms that were rightfully his. Ajax is undone by "the deliberate manipulation of men's minds by a clever talker…there is no trace of divine enmity against Ajax in Pindar's account: the forces destroying him are all too human."[75]

There is, however, no evidence of the hostility displayed by Athena in *Ajax* and the backstory in the prophecy of Calchas that justifies it: this, I submit, is an innovation of Sophocles', though one that extrapolates from existing sources and is not invented *de novo*. Sophocles converts Athena's partisanship of her favourite Odysseus into a decided and deadly enmity, caused by and driven by Ajax's own behaviour and character, thus forcing the play to take on a tragic dimension in a manner unmatched in the sources. At the same time, Odysseus, the villain in Pindar, takes on an opposite character in Sophocles: an expectation overturned, amid many others.

The other great Sophoclean innovation is the attack on the commanders. This creates new—Spartan—villains for an audience whose expectations of a villainous Odysseus are unmet. But more importantly, this innovation serves to isolate Ajax in the way that he was not in the sources by converting the entire Greek army into enemies. My approach agrees with the interpretation of Finglass who, after considering the evidence, concludes that "Athena's hostility to Ajax is not explicitly mentioned elsewhere" and "Ajax's attempted attack on the Greeks is unattested before Sophocles."[76]

[75] Ibid. 18.
[76] Finglass 2011: 37-8.

In the next chapter I shall discuss how and why Sophocles used these innovations to render a suicidal crisis of psychological richness and complexity that truly justifies Ajax's status as the iconic suicide not only of the heroic age but for all time.

Chapter 3

Sophocles' *Ajax*: the Masterly Depiction of an Iconic Suicide

In the first half of this chapter (3.1) I outline key findings in contemporary scholarship on the suicidal mind. In the second half (3.2), I look closely at the language and depiction of suicide in the *Ajax* and draw out the parallels with contemporary findings in order to suggest that Sophocles' version, though very much embedded within fifth-century Athenian socio-cultural norms, depicts the suicidal state of its eponymous hero in both psychologically accurate and dramatically convincing twentieth- and twenty-first century terms. In particular, I show how applying some of these modern concepts to the texts can greatly enrich our understanding of what Sophocles was doing and help us appreciate subtleties which some previous classical scholars have overlooked. These findings support my argument for the trans-historical and trans-cultural understanding of the psychology of suicidal states of mind and will be further elaborated in later chapters.

3.1.1 Psychological Theories of Suicide in Contemporary Thought

Before we can assess the value of contemporary specialist academic work on suicide, I need to address the recent challenges in scientific research stemming from the 'reproducibility crisis'—that is, the difficulty scientists experience in replicating the results produced by the research of previous scientists, even when applying all the same control mechanisms. The problem of reproducibility has inevitably called into question the credibility and reliability of the results of scientific research. Psychology is one of the disciplines in which out of a hundred studies from three reputable journals, almost all of which (97%) had statistically significant results, on replication by a large scale study published as *Open Science Collaboration*, only 36% reached statistical significance, a

result that is unacceptably low.[1] Psychology is not alone in this: concerns about reproducibility are widespread across disciplines, with e.g. cancer biologists reporting rates as low as 11% to 25%.[2]

Often, single studies presenting break-through findings and cutting-edge theories are given too much credence on first airing and not greeted with enough scepticism; slow, systematic checking and refining of findings and theories should be the norm. But replication itself is not enough; as the authors of the *Open Science* large-scale study point out: "It is too easy to conclude that successful replication means that the theoretical understanding of the original finding is correct. Direct replication mainly provides evidence for the reliability of a result... Understanding is achieved through multiple, diverse investigations that provide converging support for a theoretical interpretation and rule out alternative explanations."[3]

However, even successful replication does not guarantee true understanding. A well-researched theory in psychology, that of ego depletion, which had been replicated in more than one hundred studies, failed to replicate when run in twenty-four different labs under controlled conditions devised with the assistance of the original researchers.[4] Were the original methods inadequate, easily tweaked to give results? Were only studies that yielded statistically significant results published? As a 2016 article in *Slate* discussing whether ego depletion remains a viable concept says: "All the old methods are in doubt. Even meta-analyses, which once were thought to yield a gold standard for evaluating bodies of research now seem somewhat worthless."[5]

Is it indeed a "dark place" and a dark time where "everything is crumbling" as the *Slate* article eloquently puts it? There are grounds for optimism in that psychology is itself

[1] Open Science Collaboration 2015. I use this short form reference as the paper has more than 300 co-authors.
[2] Quoted in Gilbert and Strohminger 2015.
[3] Open Science Collaboration 2015.
[4] Related in Engber 2016.
[5] Ibid.

robustly addressing the issue: all the collaborators in the *Open Science Collaboration* study are themselves psychologists and committed to verifying "whether we know what we think we know."[6] New protocols are being established: open registration of hypotheses, data sharing, and giving replication studies due importance in publications.

In what follows, I have looked at studies reported in established journals and publications and referred to in reviews of the literature. A major source is the World Health Organization's 2014 report "Suicide: A Global Imperative", which draws on and summarizes the latest research to promote best practices in suicide risk factors and suicide prevention. Another source I use consists of review articles in *Lancet*, the leading UK journal in medical science, updated where possible by the latest findings in various journals. Where the data appears inconclusive I qualify or omit it where possible. However, I do not attempt to summarize the vast field of suicide research, since that is beyond the scope and purpose of my work. My focus is to survey the main psychological commonalities in suicide in the hope of shedding light on the depiction of suicide in *Ajax*.

First, a word on Emile Durkheim's seminal 1897 *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. As the title itself declares, in his sociological theory of suicide, all deaths are social: "The victim's acts which at first seem to express only his personal temperament are really the supplement and prolongation of a social condition which they express externally."[7] Durkheim's categories are valid on a high-level reading of the data in suggesting the environment and conditions that favour suicide, but are difficult to turn into preventive strategies on the ground. For this reason, I do not address his theories here except to point out that his discussions of integration and alienation overlap with various psychological factors below. Perhaps Durkheim's greatest contribution is to reduce some of the stigma around suicide by establishing it as a phenomenon worthy of scientific investigation.

[6] Open Science Collaboration 2015.
[7] Durkheim 1966:299.

I begin with setting the wider context. The World Health Organization in its 2014 report, "Suicide: A Global Imperative" sets out the latest available statistics from across the globe.

> An estimated 804,000 suicide deaths occurred worldwide in 2012 (one person every forty seconds) with actual numbers likely to be higher, since suicide is generally under-reported.
>
> Suicide accounted for 1.4% of all deaths worldwide, making it the 15th leading cause of death.
>
> On gender ratios, in richer countries, three times as many men die by suicide than women do, but in low- and middle-income countries (LIMCs) the male-to-female ratio is much lower at 1.5 men to each woman.
>
> Globally, among young adults 15 – 29 years of age suicide accounts for 8.5% of all deaths and is ranked as the second leading cause of death (after traffic accidents). In high income countries and in LMICs of the South-East Asia Region suicide accounts for 17.6% and 16.6% respectively of all deaths among young adults 15 – 29 years of age and represents the leading cause of death for both sexes.
>
> The above data refer to completed deaths; estimates for attempts put them at twenty others who made one or more suicide attempts per completed adult suicide.
>
> When assessing the relative contribution of suicide to all intentional deaths which include deaths from interpersonal violence, armed conflict and suicide (i.e. violent deaths), suicides in 2012 accounted for 56% of all violent deaths (50% in men and 71% in women). In high-income countries suicide accounted for 81% of violent deaths in both men and women, while in LMICs 44% of violent deaths in men and 70% of violent deaths in women are due to suicide.[8] More people kill themselves than are killed by all other violent causes, but this needs to be read in the context of the overall decrease in armed conflict in recent decades.
>
> After concluding that "Suicide is a major public health problem in every country and every community worldwide"[9] the WHO went on to adopt, in May 2013, the first-ever Mental Action Plan for suicide prevention with the goal of reducing the rate of suicide in countries by 10% by 2020.

[8] Ibid.

[9] WHO report 2014:22.

The WHO report summarizes the mid-decade achievements in suicide research: recognizing multicausality in the interplay of biological, psychological, social, environmental and cultural factors and the contribution of mood and alcohol use disorders; the increase in knowledge of psychological factors and cognitive mechanisms that I discuss below; and cultural variability in suicide risk factors through the recognition of psychosocial and cultural / traditional factors.

The 2014 edition of *Lancet* contains reviews on the state of research studies into suicide, looking at neurobiology,[10] psychology,[11] and bereavement by suicide.[12] The *Lancet* article by O'Connor and Nock entitled "The Psychology of Suicidal Behaviour" points out that while the presence of a previous psychiatric disorder has been widely studied as a risk factor for suicide, appearing as it does in psychological autopsy studies that suggest that 90% of people who die by suicide have a previous psychiatric disorder before their death, the presence of psychiatric disorders has "little predictive power".[13] This is because *most people with a psychiatric disorder never become suicidal*, as emphasized also in the WHO report: "The lifetime risk of suicide is estimated to be 4% in patients with mood disorders, 7% in people with alcohol dependence, 8% in people with bipolar disorder and 5% in people with schizophrenia."[14] This key finding bears repeating: "Suicidal behavior indicates deep unhappiness but not necessarily mental disorders. Many people living with mental disorders are not affected by suicidal behavior, and not all people who take their own lives have a mental disorder."[15]

[10] Van Heeringen and Mann 2014.
[11] O'Connor and Nock 2014.
[12] Pitman et al. 2014.
[13] O'Connor and Nock 2014:74.
[14] WHO report 2014:40.
[15] Ibid 53.

More importantly, according to O'Connor and Nock in the *Lancet* review article, psychiatric disorders "do not account for why people try to kill themselves".[16] To get to the "why" is to attempt to understand the psychological processes occurring throughout the full spectrum, from suicidal ideation to a specific plan to active attempts with intention to die to actual death. As such, the conscious decision to end life is the cause of death most directly affected by *psychological* factors: what is a person thinking, feeling, doing in the period leading up to the death or attempt?[17]

While suicidology as a discipline has revealed much about suicide and the suicidal mind, we must keep in mind that, as said by O'Connor in an earlier study: "suicidologists, for the most part, have not been particularly successful in predicting and preventing suicide", for reasons that include the fact that "in statistical terms, completed suicide is a relatively rare event and therefore, it is difficult to predict", and also the relative paucity of theories and evidence-based interventions.[18] The main reason, though, has been the medical focus: "Suicidal behavior had been traditionally understood within the biomedical-illness model. Consequently, often we were unable to see beyond the mental illness tautology, that the (suicidal) act defines the illness and the illness defines the act. This had led to a constriction of focus, to the identification of the underlying pathology despite the recognition that pathology alone is not a sufficient explanation for suicidal behavior."[19]

There is also the "epistemological quandary" that "suicidal thoughts often are held privately and are not detectable by others or even by oneself" and "because people often are motivated to deny or conceal such thoughts to avoid intervention or hospitalization"; one study found that 78% of patients who die by suicide explicitly deny suicidal thoughts

[16] O'Connor and Nock 2014:74.
[17] Ibid 73.
[18] O'Connor 2003:297.
[19] Ibid 298.

in their last verbal communications before killing themselves.[20] Accordingly, the ability to predict suicidal behavior is relatively poor, as summarized in a recent study by Hussey et al. that "individuals have been shown to be of particularly poor forecasters of their future behavior in the context of suicidality" and "Assessments by an observer have not fared much better; clinical judgment has repeatedly been shown to have low reliability and predictive validity."[21] "The lack of an association between clinician prediction and subsequent suicidal behavior" motivates the search for *objective* markers of suicidal intent, whether neurobiological or behavioral.[22] (My italics)

I will generally follow O'Connor and Nock's *Lancet* article's grouping of psychological risk factors into four groups: personality and individual differences, cognitive factors, social factors and negative life events.

3.1.2 Personality and Individual Differences

First, and most importantly for suicide risk, is *hopelessness*, both as a state factor (i.e. one that varies over time), and a trait factor (i.e. one that remains stable over time). Definitions include these: "Hopelessness, defined as pessimism for the future, is a strong predictor of all indices of suicidal ideation and behavior."[23] And "A system of cognitive schemas whose common denominator is negative expectations about the future."[24] "Hopelessness has been found to correlate better with suicidal ideation than depression in prospective studies…Hopelessness is arguably the best predictor overall of suicide completions in clinical populations."[25]

[20] Nock et al. 2010: 515, 511.
[21] Hussey et al. 2016:1.
[22] Nock et al. 2010: 516, 511.
[23] O'Connor and Nock 2014:75.
[24] Joiner et al. 2005: 301.
[25] Ibid.

Impulsivity has been associated with suicidal ideation, though it is more evident as a suicide risk in young people.[26] Florida psychologist Thomas Joiner (whom we will encounter as a major scholar and theorist of suicide) links impulsivity to aggression, pointing to studies that show that "no matter how aggression is defined (as a psychiatric diagnosis, psychological construct, or overt violent behavior), it confers risk for suicide."[27] This will be revisited below.

Perfectionism has been associated with suicidal ideation and attempts, especially "socially prescribed perfectionism (defined as the belief that other people [e.g. family members] hold unrealistically high expectations of you), is most consistently associated with suicidal thoughts and attempts, especially when these socially determined beliefs are internalized as self-criticism."[28] The same authors, O'Connor and Nock expand this definition: "The social dimensions of perfectionism increase suicide risk by promoting a sense of social disconnection."[29] It is not perfectionism *per se*, but its role in increasing isolation that is significant. In general, perfectionism can lead to a host of difficulties arising from the perfectionist's tendency to set unrealistic standards and strive to attain them, selectively attend to and overgeneralize failure, stringently self-evaluate, and engage in "all-or-none thinking whereby *only* total success or total failure exist as outcomes."[30] Further "The possibility that perfectionism has both personal and social components is consistent with research on the private versus public aspects of the self…"[31] This study by Hewitt and Flett looked at three types of perfectionism i.e. self-oriented, other-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism and noted that the first two involved perceptions that the standards involved are within the individual's control, whereas "In contrast, socially prescribed perfectionism is derived from the perception of

[26] O'Connor and Nock 2014:76.
[27] Joiner et al. 2005:303.
[28] O'Connor and Nock 2014: 76.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Hewitt and Flett 1991: 456.
[31] Ibid.

other people's imposed expectations. As such, socially prescribed perfectionism is associated with an external locus of control…and is reactive rather than proactive."[32]

Or, as put in a more recent study by Hill et al.:

> "Self-oriented perfectionism involves the belief that self-acceptance is based on the attainment of exceedingly high personal standards. In contrast socially prescribed perfectionism involves the belief that self and other-acceptance is contingent upon the attainment of exceedingly high standards that are externally imposed by others."[33]

Furthermore, "Seeking the approval of others is suggested to be an particularly problematic strategy to establish a sense of self-worth, especially when the approval of generalized others is sought rather than the approval of any specific individual or group."[34] The same scholars note that "…the perceived need to defend, maintain and enhance self-worth is likely to place strain on the cognitive, emotional and physical resources of those with higher levels of …perfectionism…External contingencies are both more difficult to satisfy and maintain, and are perceived to need to be pursued more frequently and intensely."[35]

The distinction between private and public selves correlates well with the shame culture of ancient Greece, as will appear in the discussion on *Ajax* below.

The *Lancet* article includes discussion of neuroticism and extroversion as factors; I exclude them both because the research is inconclusive and the terms express concepts which only emerged in relatively recent psychology and do not translate easily to classical antiquity. But *Cognitive factors* (i.e. thought processes that appear to increase the risk of suicide) are an important part of the conceptual apparatus. *Cognitive rigidity*, inflexibility

[32] Hewitt and Flett 1991:468.
[33] Hill et al. 2011:238.
[34] Ibid. 241.
[35] Ibid.

or constriction is a feature identified from early on as symptomatic of the suicidal mind. As Neuringer put it in 1964: "That suicidal individuals have a disposition to think in a somewhat rigid and inflexible manner seems to have become part of the general folklore of suicide…that the suicidal individual, because of his rigid modes of thinking, finds it difficult to develop new or alternative solutions to debilitating emotional difficulties. Thus the individual feels helpless and finds himself in a situation of "no exit" from an intolerably anxiety laden situation and can only make his escape into death."[36]

Cognitive inflexibility defined as "the failure to modify decision-making behavior in response to external feedback and changing environmental circumstances…resulting in cognitive constriction and problem-solving deficits" is seen as contributing to suicide ideation.[37] (Suicidal ideation refers to thoughts about suicide, which can range from fleeting or occasional thoughts to constant and extensive, and includes planning but not the completed act.) The same study by Miranda et al. found that "cognitive inflexibility predicted suicidal thinking at a six-month follow-up, although only among young adults with a prior lifetime suicide attempt."[38] Past attempters may have become preoccupied with suicide as a solution that then increased feelings of hopelessness. Suicide attempters appear to generate fewer solutions to problems compared to non-attempters, and that the solutions are less effective.[39]

Cognitive constriction is that tunnelling and narrowing of perspective described by Los Angeles psychologist Edwin Shneidman (whose ideas about suicide were fundamentally informed by his early work with U.S. army veterans): "Synonyms for constriction are a tunnelling or focusing or narrowing of the range of options usually available to *that* individual's consciousness when the mind is not panicked into dichotomous thinking: either some specific (almost magical) total solution *or* cessation;

[36] Neuringer 1964:54.
[37] Miranda et al. 2012:181.
[38] Ibid. p 184.
[39] Ibid.

all or nothing…the range of choices has narrowed to two—not very much of a range. The usual life-sustaining images of loved ones are not disregarded; worse, they are not even within the range of what is in the mind."[40] As the term suggests, *dichotomous thinking* is expressed in polarities: personally significant events, objects, meanings, attitudes are expressed and experienced in their most extreme forms e.g. all or nothing, never or always. The dichotomous thinker can see only the extreme alternatives: he cannot perceive that moderate choices are open to him.

I wish to examine the concept of dichotomous thinking in some detail as it will figure in my discussion of Sophocles' language, especially in Ajax's "deception speech". Neuringer[41] found that extensive dichotomization of thought was associated with suicidal tendency. In a 1961 study he operationally defined dichotomous thinking as a *relatively* extreme value judgement, not, as suggested by Shneidman's theory, the *extreme* value judgement involving an inability to perceive alternatives. His 1967 study comprised three groups in five Veterans Administration hospitals and one large metropolitan general hospital. The three groups consisted of attempted suicides, those with psychosomatic problems and normal controls. He evaluated twelve paired terms: god-devil, life-death, honour-shame, success-failure, love-hate, and democracy-communism. These terms, relating to self, parents, political systems, emotional states, behaviours, and theological entities, were selected as tending to elicit strong reactions in most people. Dichotomous thinking appeared in all three groups, suggesting that such a cognitive mode is a normal way of organizing thought. However, the suicidal and psychosomatic groups used dichotomous thinking along a value dimension so that things, persons and events appeared more or less "good" or "bad" leading Neuringer to speculate that "Stressful life situations may force an individual to organize his value system in a simplified "all-or-nothing" manner in order to deal with

[40] Shneidman 1985: 138-9.
[41] Neuringer 1961, 1967, 1968.

interpersonal crises" since this gives a somewhat stable semblance of order from which to make decisions than from a much more differentiated organization.[42]

Neuringer continues: "The suicidal subjects viewed the concepts as being either much more or much less intense, vigorous, poignant, harsh, sharp, powerful, influential, energetic, etc. than did the psychosomatic or normal subjects…the suicidal individual … appear(s) to experience things more keenly and poignantly than other people and feel that things around them are either very influential and powerful or very impotent and weak… One can feel sympathetic to the suicidal individual's plight if he experiences that he is surrounded only by either very powerfully strong and active or extremely weak and passive forces. Such a situation can lead him to despair of ever changing things in order to find solutions to his life's problems. He can feel trapped by such a situation to such an extent that he can see no possible way ever out of his predicament. It is then not incomprehensible that suicide becomes a "problem-solving behavior" when an individual is backed into a corner that is alive with malignancy and where hope is feeble."[43]

Language considerations take us to the study of suicide notes. A 1960 study of genuine compared to simulated suicide notes concluded that the genuine notes showed a preponderance of words related to places and people compared to the simulated notes.[44] The authors speculate that since only a small number leave a note (12-15%), these note writers were likely not typical of suicides but comprised persons wanting to make a final act of verbal communication as "a way of manipulating and dealing with the living world rather than a renunciation of all interest in it."[45] Even compared to personal

[42] Neuringer 1967: 99.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Gottschalk and Gleser 1960, on the same genuine and simulated suicide notes that Shneidman and Farberrow used in their early studies.
[45] Ibid. 202.

correspondence, the references to other people and places in the suicide notes remained significant with the authors' concluding: "This does suggest that individuals who write genuine suicide notes do have unusual preoccupations with the world of objects, animate and inanimate…The fact that the suicidal individual who writes a note uses more references to places or spatial relation than the non-suicidal person may be a reflection of the note-writing, suicidal person's serious intention of making a one-way trip, a permanent separation from the world of the living, with a modicum of regrets. A perusal of letters by people leaving others or people travelling also shows a relatively frequent use of such words."[46]

In the language of suicide, we might expect to encounter *ambivalence*, which in the suicidal context is the internal struggle between wanting to live and wanting to die. A number of studies term this *reasons for living*. In a study of suicide attempters, the wish to die was greater than the wish to live, and the degree of suicidal intent more severe.[47] In a ten year follow-up study of 5,814 psychiatric outpatients, even after controlling for other risk factors, individuals who had moderate-to-strong desire to die were at increased risk of suicide.[48] However, research into the language of suicide notes has surprisingly yielded little in the way of ambivalence. Shneidman, in a summary of the research on suicide notes, concluded that most suicide notes were "surprisingly commonplace, banal, even sometimes poignantly pedestrian and dull" and suggests that the nature of the emotional crisis at the time of the suicide (the act of suicide is often close in time to the writing of the suicide note) renders the person "more constricted, irrelevant, scattered and disorganized in his logical style. He is simply not at his cerebral best at the moment of truth."[49] Shneidman proposes five possible epistemological kinds of suicide notes of which the last, which he calls "ambithetical", would present the "simultaneous co-

[46] Ibid. 203.
[47] Kovacs and Beck 1977.
[48] Brown et al. 2005.
[49] Shneidman 1973:380, 382.

existence of a point of view and its opposite (contrary, contradictory, antinomy) [and] come closer to the psychological reality" of ambivalence. Such notes are relatively rare because "The expression of the ubiquitous ambivalence of the human spirit needs time for contemplation" and he suggests that rather than suicide notes, they are to be found in series of journal or diary entries, some letters, and in novels dealing with these contradictory aspects of good and evil: "The key is in the conjunction."[50] I will demonstrate that Sophocles' expressions in Ajax's deception speech are a superb depiction, in poetic terms, of ambivalence in the suicidal mind, even while dramatically cogent and powerful.

Cognitive constriction or rigidity which impairs decision-making is also linked to another cognitive trait: *rumination* defined as "a repetitive focus on an individual's own symptoms of distress"[51] and "the tendency to respond to a negative mood by focusing on its causes, meanings, and consequences".[52] There are different explanations of the proposed link between rumination and suicidal behaviour: rumination has been theorized as instrumental in increasing hopelessness, maintaining negative feelings, furthering cognitive inflexibility, contributing to poor problem-solving skills, increasing recall and intensity of negative autobiographical memories. It is also suggested that rumination is a cognitive strategy to avoid experiencing intolerable emotions,[53] or a strategy to avoid taking action to change circumstances, leading to feelings of ineffectiveness and hopelessness. One study suggests that "rumination may be a consequence of the perceived inability to change one's emotional state"[54] i.e. being caught or stuck in an emotional quagmire. Significantly for suicide prevention, rumination prospectively predicts suicidal ideation.[55]

[50] Ibid. 389-90.
[51] O'Connor and Nock 2014:77.
[52] Miranda et al. 2013:786.
[53] Ibid. 788.
[54] Ibid. 792.
[55] Miranda et al. 2007.

If rumination that broods on distress contributes to suicidal behaviour, its opposite, *thought suppression*, is perhaps unexpectedly, another contributory cognitive factor. "Attempted thought suppression has paradoxical effects as a self-control strategy, perhaps even producing the very obsession or preoccupation that it is directed against"[56] and may block a natural tendency to find meaning in traumatic events that can "hamper effective coping processes."[57] Worse, suppression may increase the frequency and intensity of the suppressed emotions. Research findings by Pettit et al. suggest that "among suicidal inpatients, those who suppressed suicidal thoughts experienced more severe suicidal ideation."[58] "Individuals who experience suicidal thoughts may find them disturbing and attempt to suppress them from awareness. Paradoxically, this may increase their frequency and severity."[59]

Death in general and suicide in particular are disturbing subjects, and a move to suppress is a normal reflex even within professionals as when Pettit et al. go on to advise that clinicians learn to "identify suicidal thought suppression and assist patients in developing other coping responses to suicidal ideation" in order "to reduce its persistence and escalation", they add: "It also seems likely that some clinicians, perhaps due to their own anxieties about suicide, may implicitly or explicitly convey the impression that suicidal thoughts should be stopped."[60] Instead "Acceptance-oriented strategies commonly used in the treatment of unwanted thoughts in emotional disorders may be adapted to the context of suicidal thoughts. Such strategies encourage patients to experience thoughts without trying to change, control, or avoid them. Based on positive findings from research on emotional disorders, acceptance-oriented strategies geared

[56] Wegner et al. 1987:5.
[57] Ibid. 12.
[58] Pettit et al. 2009:761.
[59] Ibid. 762.
[60] Ibid. 762-3.

toward suicidal may promote a reduction in the frequency of, severity of, and negative affect associated with suicidal thoughts."[61]

I return to this factor in the section below on acceptance strategies. The key appears to be *accepting and experiencing difficult emotions* as opposed to either suppressing the thought or avoiding the emotion by obsessively re-running the same thoughts and impressions.

Another cognitive factor in increasing the likelihood of suicidal behaviour is *autobiographical memory biases*, i.e. the "decreased ability to recall specific autobiographical memories, which might in turn impair their ability to imagine the future and to engage in effective problem-solving."[62] The assumption behind one study was the following: "We assume that immediately prior to the suicide attempt the person is not amenable to persuasion or able to use effective coping strategies, partly because he or she can remember nothing but a string of failures, arguments, disappointments, and so forth."[63] On testing this assumption, the study found that respondents had a tendency to retrieve general rather than specific memories, an example of constriction.

Another manifestation of constriction is *attentional biases* i.e. "a greater attention to, or interference for, stimuli related to suicide (e.g. suicide attempters take longer to name the colour of words related to suicide than they do for neutral or negative words and this bias predicts future suicide attempts above and beyond other factors."[64]

If the past is constricted, what of the future? Again we come across constriction: "pessimism for the future" and "*impaired positive future thinking*" "have been associated with suicidal ideation and attempts."[65] The suicidal person's ability to imagine a positive future is compromised: he is unable to believe that "one's future can change for the better

[61] Ibid. 763.
[62] O'Connor and Nock 2014:78.
[63] Williams and Broadbent 1986:144.
[64] O'Connor and Nock 2014:79, Cha et al. 2010, Adler et al. 2015.
[65] O'Connor and Nock 2014: 79.

(e.g., one will feel better in the future, one will be able to engage in useful plans for the future, one will be able to reach desired goals for the future)" and that "higher future orientation is significantly associated with less suicide risk."[66]

Ideas and associations around death and dying commonly appear to the suicidal person. The occurrence of *imagery of suicide* and "flash-forwards" of death or dying is an area of study that is just beginning. In a small study of fifteen depressed and formerly suicidal patients in remission by Holmes et al., all reported "experiencing detailed mental imagery in addition to verbal thoughts when at their most despairing".[67] In particular images of "what might happen if you died" and images of "planning or preparing to make a suicide attempt or harm yourself" were more frequent than verbal thoughts.[68] "All patients reported experiencing intrusive, repetitive suicide-related images when at their most depressing and despairing"[69] including images of future suicidal action, e.g. jumping from a cliff or from a railway platform, slashing wrists or crashing the car. There were also sensory images of dead self and funeral, and images of locations providing opportunity for suicide. Both these categories are future-oriented. At the same time "While all images were rated as distressing, most participants reported that images were also comforting."[70] The comfort may arise from the expectation of the pain ceasing on their death.

Holmes et al. suggest the term "flash-forwards" to suicide to describe these suicide-related images, much as the term "flashbacks" to past trauma is applied in Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD. Just as "flashback memories are rich sensory-perceptual images rather than verbal thoughts, and are affect-laden, accompanied by a sense of reality or "newness"- as if the past trauma is really happening", "The "flash-

[66] Chang et al. 2013:797.
[67] Holmes et al. 2007:423.
[68] Ibid. 428.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid. 431.

forward" images reported here were also described as possessing sensory qualities, of being real and compelling, and rich in detail. Inspection of the content of the most significant images related to suicide…indicates that the majority of participants' suicide-related images were of the future rather than only of the past."[71]

Implicit associations with death/suicide also characterize suicide attempters. A study by Nock et al. that "tested whether individuals who made a decision to kill themselves would reveal stronger implicit cognition associating self with death/suicide and whether the strength of such an association would predict actual suicide attempts"[72] found that "patients presenting to the emergency department after a suicide attempt had a significantly stronger implicit association between death/suicide and self than those presenting with other psychiatric emergencies [as well] than did those who engaged in self-injurious behavior with no intent to die."[73] Strikingly, such mental association with death predicted future suicide attempts better than prediction of future suicide attempts by either clinicians or patients: "Patients whose performance revealed a stronger association between death/suicide and self were significantly more likely to make a suicide attempt after leaving the emergency department than those with a stronger association between life and self…Specifically, the presence of an implicit association with death/suicide was associated with an approximately six-fold increase in the odds of making a suicide attempt in the following six months."[74]

Loneliness and social isolation are factors which straddle personal and social realms; as the authors of the *Lancet* article put it: "Social isolation and the absence of social support are established correlates of suicide risk, and are important components of

[71] Ibid.
[72] Nock et al. 2010:511.
[73] Ibid. 514.
[74] Ibid. 514-15.

contemporary models of suicidal behavior. Any assessment of suicide risk should, as a matter of course, assess the extent to which a vulnerable individual is socially isolated."[75]

Yet it is not isolation *per se* but the individual's perception of it that contributes to suicidal ideation. This factor goes back to Durkheim and early researchers such as Shneidman. Thomas Joiner has taken this further by proposing the cumbersome phrases *"thwarted belongingness"* and *"burdensomeness"* as key factors in suicide ideation, and which he develops as components of his "interpersonal theory of suicide" discussed below.[76] As described in a 2009 study by Joiner et al.:

> "Perceived burdensomeness is the view that one's existence burdens family, friends, and/or society. This view produces the idea that 'my death will be worth more than my life to family, friends, society,' which, it is important to emphasize, is a potentially fatal misperception. Past research … has documented an association between higher levels of perceived burdensomeness and suicidal ideation."[77]
>
> "A low sense of belongingness is the experience that one is alienated from others, not an integral part of a family, circle of friends, or other valued group…a persuasive case can be made that, of all the risk factors for suicidal behavior, ranging from the molecular to the cultural levels, the strongest and most uniform support has emerged for indices related to social isolation…"[78] "Furthermore, suicide rates go down during times of celebration, when people pull together to celebrate, and during times of hardship or tragedy, when people pull together to commiserate."[79]

At this point I want to look a little closer at psychological theories of suicide which, as the authors of the *Lancet* review article say, "provide a framework to understand how a complex interplay of factors combine to increase risk of suicide. Additionally, these

[75] O'Connor and Nock 2014:79.
[76] Joiner 2005.
[77] Joiner et al. 2009:634.
[78] Ibid. 635.
[79] Ibid.

theories help to identify potentially modifiable targets for treatment."[80] These authors discuss Joiner's "interpersonal theory of suicide", and usefully summarize and paraphrase it thus:

> …the coexistence of high levels of perceived burdensomeness (i.e. feeling a burden on others) and low level of belongingness (i.e. feeling alienated or that you do not belong), and being hopeless that these states will not change, lead to the development of suicidal desire (i.e. suicidal ideation). Suicidal desire is a necessary though not sufficient cause for a suicide attempt. However, if a person with high suicidal desire acquires the capability to attempt suicide, then the risk of a serious suicide attempt is increased. Acquired capability comprises reduced fear of death and increased tolerance for physical pain. According to the theory, exposure to and encounter with previous painful experiences increase an individual's tolerance for the physical-pain aspects of self-harm through habituation processes. The core components of the theory have attracted considerable research attention.[81]

Joiner's theory contains a certain elegance in that it accounts for the fact that while suicidal ideation is relatively common, only a tiny fraction of the population will actually kill themselves. As quoted in the Van Orden study: "Estimates from nationally representative studies indicate that each year, 3.3% of Americans seriously consider suicide (i.e., active suicidal ideation), 1.0% develop a plan for suicide, and 0.6% attempt suicide. Yet, each year, only 0.01% of Americans die by suicide (American Association of Suicidology, 2006)."[82] And they add that since the theory involves three relatively rare conditions that, when present simultaneously (even rarer) are sufficient to result in lethal (or near lethal) suicide attempts, it "is consistent with the rarity of suicidal behavior itself."[83]

[80] O'Connor and Nock 2014:74.
[81] Ibid. 75.
[82] Van Orden et al. 2010:580.
[83] Ibid. 592.

A 2008 study by Van Orden et al. studied the interaction of these three factors and "found that gender was related to acquired capability level, with men exhibiting higher levels of acquired capability. This finding dovetails with the fact that the majority of deaths by suicide are by men, presumably because men are more likely to have acquired the capability for suicide."[84] These psychologists observe that results suggest that the desire for suicide "results from the joint presence of two related but distinct interpersonal variables—an unmet need to belong (i.e. thwarted belongingness) and an unmet need to contribute to the welfare of others (i.e. perceived burdensomeness). The theory does not propose that thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness are the only paths to suicide desire but that their joint presence is likely to result in a highly pernicious form of suicidal desire."[85]

A 2009 study by Joiner and others probed the "interactive nature of the theory, which posits a three-way interaction…the joint occurrence of perceived burdensomeness and failed belongingness is sufficient to produce the desire to die and that this desire translates into lethal or near-lethal behavior only in the presence of the acquired capacity for lethality."[86] The results of the study were in line with the prediction. "Results were obtained above and beyond the contribution of numerous documented risk factors for suicidal behavior, including depression, hopelessness, and borderline personality disorder features. In line with the theory, these results suggest that individuals experiencing both low belongingness and perceived burdensomeness are most likely to act on suicidal ideation (i.e. attempt suicide) in the presence of the acquired capability to overcome self-preservation motives and to engage in suicidal behavior."[87]

However, a note of caution is struck by a review of the literature on belongingness and suicide by Hatcher and Stubbersfield, which makes this observation:

[84] Van Orden et al. 2008:78.
[85] Ibid. 80.
[86] Joiner et al. 2009:635.
[87] Ibid. 643.

> The principal finding … is that in nonclinical populations, people who have a low sense of belonging have a higher risk of having suicidal thoughts or a history of suicide attempts. However, the association is weak and may only be important when other factors, such as feeling a burden and being depressed, are also important. These inconsistent findings appear to be due to multiple conceptualizations of the idea of belonging, variation in measures of belonging, and the nature of outcomes assessed that are at a low frequency in the mainly nonclinical populations studied…the lack of homogeneity in the study methods and populations included in our review meant we were unable to do a meta-analysis.[88]

The same study goes on to query the definitions of "belonging" and whether this is separate from loneliness and suggests that belonging should also be seen as part of "identity [as] often referred to in the literature on indigenous ideas around connectedness. This is not just about belonging in the present day but also belonging or being connected to something in the past. That is, it is not just an idea of present relationships but also a cognitive and affective map of identity that answers the question, 'where do I belong?' This something may not be a person but may be a history, a place, a family, or some other piece of shared identity."[89] Thus the concept of belonging could be expanded from social support to a type of connectedness which "could be a considerable benefit in using cultural ideas as a foundation for belonging and using this to address high rates of suicide in the indigenous populations."[90]

Research along these lines has taken place in the Native American community in the US, where suicide rates are 1.5 times the national rate. A 2009 study found that

[88] Hatcher and Stubbersfield 2013:434.
[89] Ibid. 435.
[90] Ibid.

"connectedness to others in the community is shared through traditional practices and ceremonies" and appears to have a buffering role against suicidality.[91]

I wish to return to the issue of acquired capability for suicide. Suicide often involves injury to self and accordingly an element of *fearlessness and pain insensitivity* is hypothesized to be involved in suicidal behaviour. In one study, "Suicide attempters viewed themselves as more fearless and insensitive to pain than suicide ideators, and reported a greater history of painful and provocative life events than ideators and controls…it was the specifically painful and provocative life events rather than general negative life events that were associated with suicide attempts."[92]

To reiterate, in the interpersonal theory of suicide, a desire for suicide is not sufficient to lead to suicidal behaviour. As Joiner et al. in 2009 put it: since "the body is generally not designed to cooperate with its own early demise",

> suicide entails a fight with self-preservation motives…the capability for suicide is acquired largely through repeated exposure to painful or fearsome experiences. Such exposure results in habituation and, in turn, a higher tolerance for pain and a fearlessness in the face of death. Acquired capability is viewed as a continuous construct. It is accumulated over time with repeated exposure to salient experiences and is influenced by the nature of those experiences, such that more painful and provocative experiences will confer greater capacity for suicide.[93]

When it came to relating capability for suicide to former combatants, the authors point out that the study was "limited by the lack of information available on prior combat exposure…according to the theory, combat exposure would certainly be a potential source for habituating to painful and provocative experiences and, consequently, acquiring the capability to enact lethal self-injury."[94]

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[91] Hill 2009: 73.
[92] Smith et al. 2010:875.
[93] Joiner et al. 2009:635.
[94] Ibid. 644.

This issue is complicated, even more so in the case of combat veterans: is aggression a behavioural marker for suicide or is it a question of habituation via combat? In one study of completed suicides investigating the relationship between measures of aggression, impulsivity, and suicide method, "Measures of lifetime history of aggressive behaviors were higher in the group that used a violent method of suicide."[95] Even after controlling for age, sex, substance abuse and psychopathology, "history of lifetime aggression and the interaction between lifetime aggression and lifetime impulsivity remain associated with a violent method of suicide."[96] Violent methods of suicide included hanging, firearms, laceration, jumping from a height, traffic 'accidents', electrocution, self-immolation and strangulation with a plastic bag. Non-violent methods included gas intoxication, drug poisoning and drowning.

In a 2011 review by Gvion and Apter of the literature on aggression, impulsivity and suicide behaviuor, the authors point out that there are neurobiological markers as well as evidence of familial transmission of suicidal and aggression behaviors. "Many persons who attempt suicide have significantly higher scores for lifetime and trait aggression."[97] Moreover, "aggression may be indirectly linked to high lethality attempts. It was found that violence during the last year of life is more frequent among suicide victims than accident victims."[98]

> Impulsive suicide attempts are acts of self-harm involving little preparation or premeditation; non-impulsive suicide attempts are preceded by preparation and forethought…One way to operationalize impulsivity of the suicide attempt is to look at the degree of objective signs of planning.[99]

[95] Dumais et al. 2005:1377.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Gvion and Apter 2011:96.
[98] Ibid. 97.
[99] Ibid. 98.

The Suicide Intent Scale used in a number of studies has the following planning subscale consisting of eight objective items: isolation, timing, precautions against discovery, help-seeking, final acts, preparation, leaving a note and suicidal communication. The same authors suggest that: "A second way to evaluate impulsivity of the attempt is to examine the amount of time spent between the decision to attempt suicide and the actual attempt." There is however no consensus on how much time constitutes premeditation: five minutes, twenty minutes, two hours and twenty-four hours have all been suggested. In a number of studies a significant number of attempters reported less than five minutes' preparation. In general, the greater the planning and preparation, the greater the lethality.[100]

Even impulsivity has been inadequately defined. Is it novelty-seeking, risk taking, non-planning, implying a short attention span, and acting on the spur of the moment? Note too that drug taking and alcohol abuse complicate the picture. As Gvion and Apter conclude: "The association between aggression, impulsivity, and suicidal behavior is well established, well documented and is based on decades of research and clinical practice. Nonetheless the literature is confusing and contradictory and not easy to organize in a coherent manner. This is probably due to the difficulty in defining and separating out these concepts and the fact that there is much overlap between them."[101]

Joiner's interpersonal theory discussed above, also called the Interpersonal-Psychological Theory of Suicide (IPT), attempts to reconcile these different facets: Bender et al. (a team including Joiner) propose that "impulsive individuals are more likely to experience … painful and provocative events that habituate them to fear and death, and therefore, are more likely to have acquired the capability for suicide, should they desire it."[102] Thus, "the connection between impulsivity and suicide is not related to suicide

[100] Ibid. 98-9.
[101] Ibid. 104.
[102] Bender et al. 2011:302.

being an impulsive act but rather an indirect risk factor related to acquiring the capability for suicide through exposure to painful and provocative events."[103] This study positively tested this hypothesis to conclude that "people who are impulsive often do painful and provocative things, and over time they habituated to the pain of these events giving them the acquired capability to kill themselves (if they ever desire it)."[104]

In a study of the IPT as it applies to the military, Edward Selby's team (also including Joiner) needed to untangle PTSD as well. They point out that "despite the difficulties and potentially horrifying experiences, the majority of those who enter theaters of war remain relatively unaffected."[105] However, "there appears to be a strong dose-response relationship between amount of combat exposure and severity of mental health problems…increased frequency and intensity of combat exposure may be better predictors of negative psychological outcomes than predisposing factors or brief combat exposure."[106]

The same study summarizes the most important predictors for development of problems and psychopathology following combat exposure to include: previous trauma history (accidents, assaults, sexual abuse and natural disasters), younger age, pre-combat history of psychiatric illness, problematic family relations prior to combat, lower intellectual ability, exposure to alcoholism and violence. The study tested the hypothesis that acquired capability is the part of the IPT that contributes the most to suicide in the military. A survey of the studies concluded that "there is significant evidence supporting a relationship between deployment to a war zone and suicide in the years after deployment."[107] Combat wounds and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder "may also contribute to increased acquired capability through mental habituation to pain and death"

[103] Ibid.
[104] Ibid. 305.
[105] Selby et al. 2010:300.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Ibid. 301.

as well as the sense of "invincibility" which may lead soldiers to engage in more risky behavior, including substance abuse and physical aggression. As the study concludes:

> Overall, combat exposure appears to have many negative influences on suicidal behavior. There are numerous ways through which combat exposure may contribute to suicidal behavior in military personnel: witnessing violence against others and against one's fellow service members, enacting violence against others, and experiencing multiple and/or severe injuries in combat are all likely to increase acquired capability. The constant threat of loss of life and severe injury may also cause habituation to fear of death and pain.[108]

Habituation to diverse forms of provocation seems related to the specific type of training that individuals receive in the military. A 2004 document cited by Selby's team listed some cases of soldier suicide: "From the cases listed, those who jumped tended to be in the Air Force (decreased fear of heights), those who hung themselves tended to be in the Navy (extensive experience with rope and knots), and those who shot themselves tended to be in the Army or Marines (extensive training with guns). Thus, training with exposure to activities that could be used for suicide may increase habituation to that activity, making its use for suicide less fear provoking."[109]

As for the other elements of the theory, military service can enhance feelings of belonging through bonds and camaraderie and shared experiences. But the return home can be problematic if the war has been publicly unpopular (e.g. Vietnam) or one is unable to integrate into civilian life or suffers from PTSD or survival guilt. Yet, "Military service is likely to be a positive occupational experience for most individuals, instilling feelings of honor, accomplishment, contributing to society, and having a sense of

[108] Ibid. 302.
[109] Ibid.

mission…[feeling] part of a greater cause for their country."[110] These can be protective factors for mental health and higher levels of life satisfaction.

For some though, positive feelings can change to negative if "a return from combat or discharge from the military may result in experiencing feelings of loss of purpose or perceived burdensomeness. While on the front lines or in the military, the individual may have felt a greater purpose; but once discharged, the individual may feel that he or she has nothing more to contribute, or that he or she is a drain on society because of disabling injuries or other adjustment difficulties. One study found that *excessive motivation to excel* in the Army was an important risk factor for completed suicide among soldiers who experienced combat, suggesting that perhaps these same individuals were experiencing greater feelings of failure or perceived burdensomeness at the time of their deaths."[111] Linked to this are the greater feelings of failure: "Perceptions of burdensomeness may be particularly increased if one abandons or is *expelled from the military*", with increased suicide risk among personnel who were prematurely repatriated or who suffered legal problems, misconduct, unauthorized absences, substance abuse (my italics).[112] Accordingly, Selby's team recommended the IPT as a risk assessment tool for military personnel.

Another factor contributing to suicide in the military is easy access to means of suicide, which is well-known as a risk factor in suicide. "One study found that military personnel who had access to firearms as a part of their duties accounted for over 50% of suicides, with many of these incidents taking place while the individuals were on the job rather than off duty. If an individual is designated at higher risk for suicide, it may be beneficial to reassign them to duties that do not have easy access to firearms…Similarly, training recruits determined to be at risk for suicide may need to be restricted from firearm

[110] Ibid. 303.
[111] Ibid.
[112] Ibid.

training, as one study found that a high percentage of suicides during basic training took place during marksmanship training."[113]

While suicide notes have some limitations as explained above, in a University of British Columbia study on suicide in the US Air Force by Cox et al.,[114] psychological autopsies on decedents (dead persons) looked at records of verbal communications thirty days prior to suicide and in suicide notes and noted that "*hopelessness and perceived burdensomeness were included in notes but not verbally communicated and therefore hidden from others*. In contrast *thwarted belongingness and rejection were the more often communicated both verbally and in the notes*, suggesting these factors were never resolved and were missed opportunities for intervention" (my italics). More risk factors were expressed in the notes than verbally, which supports the arguments that service members do not express their mental health concerns.

Communication was one of the suicide commonalities identified by Shneidman. As in the above study by Cox et al., much of this comes out of "psychological autopsies", a phrase coined by Shneidman and defined as "nothing less than a thorough retrospective investigation of the intention of the decedent" (i.e. the dead person under discussion).[115] Such investigations are especially required in equivocal death scenarios to distinguish between suicide, accidental death and homicide in order to resolve issues of *inter alia* malpractice, product liability, insurance and benefits claims.[116] As described by Isometsa: "The aim of the procedure is to get as clear and accurate a view of the life situation, personality, mental health and possible treatment provided by health care facilities preceding suicide as possible" and include interviews with family members, police, health care professionals, study of forensic reports, medical, school and work records.[117]

[113] Ibid. 304-5.
[114] Cox et al. 2011.
[115] Quoted in Scott et al. 2006:805.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Isometsa 2001:379.

Importantly for any transhistorical or cross-cultural approach to suicide, Isometsa reviewed twenty-three autopsy projects carried out in USA, UK, Sweden, Australia, Austria, Hungary, Israel, Finland, Canada, Taiwan and India between 1959 and 1999 and concluded that, "Overall, the findings from these studies are highly convergent irrespective of culture."[118] On the issue of communication of suicidal intent, definitions were difficult: "If only very explicit statements of intent are included, then it appears that about one-third to one-half of all victims have communicated their intent to family members, and a roughly similar proportion (but not necessarily the same subjects) to health care professionals during the final few months."[119] This is still a high number; and would be higher still if hints and less explicit statements of intent are included.

Significantly, Isometsa found that communication appears to dry up closer to the suicidal act: "One of the reasons why suicides seem so commonly to occur as a surprise is that in completed suicides, communication of intent is not very common temporally close to the act. This may perhaps be because of a deliberate decision not to let anyone intervene, ambivalence concerning the subject, or hopelessness. For example, of those 100 suicides having met a health care professional the very day of suicide in Finland in 1987-88, only 21% had communicated their intent. Thus the pathway leading to a completed suicide does not usually include telling about the intent to someone during the final days."[120]

The University of British Columbia study of primary care visits found that people who had died by suicide often visited physicians just prior to the act and for mental health reasons,[121] meaning that physicians often have the opportunity to intervene prior to suicide. This team noted that a study of patients admitted to an intensive care unit for a suicide attempt by tablet overdose had evaluated what patients who had attempted suicide

[118] Ibid. 380.
[119] Ibid. 383.
[120] Ibid.
[121] Cox et al. 2011:399.

communicated to their significant others just prior to the attempt and how their significant others responded. The study concluded, "even though patients frequently communicated their distress and significant others understood these communications, *significant others most often responded with silence* [my italics]. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that those who contemplate suicide frequently communicate their distress to healthcare professionals or to other people in their lives before making a suicide attempt; however, opportunities for intervention are often missed."[122]

Factors of *defeat* and *entrapment* are better explicated within the Cry of Pain theory, the second theory I wish to discuss, which builds upon Shneidman's commonality of escape as the common action in suicide, escape from intolerable psychological pain. Using studies of animal behavior, the theory argues that

> suicidal behavior should be seen as a cry of pain rather than the traditional cry for help…suicidal behavior is reactive, the response ("the cry") to a situation that has three components: defeat, no escape and no rescue.[123]

In a study of suicide attempters, "the co-presence of all three cry of pain variables primes an individual for suicidal behavior…the parasuicides [i.e. attempters] with respect to a recent stressful event, reported significantly higher levels of defeat, lower levels of escape potential and lower levels of rescue (social support) than the matched hospital controls"; however a limitation of the study was that "it is not clear whether the cry of pain responses are causes or consequences of the suicidal attempt."[124]

In a systematic review by Taylor et al. of the literature on defeat and entrapment and their association with, *inter alia*, suicide, the research on animal behaviour using mainly social rank theory and psychobiological systems is usefully summarized:

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[122] Ibid. The study cited here was by D. Wolk-Wasserman.
[123] O'Connor 2003:299.
[124] Ibid. 305.

> The results of these animal-based studies may have direct relevance to understanding psychopathology such as depression in humans. Many of the psychobiological systems that have been linked to social rank in these studies (i.e. serotonergic, dopaminergic, hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal) are also believed to underpin psychopathology in humans. Moreover, it is likely that the proclivities toward social hierarchies and the associated defense mechanisms apparent in so many other species, including closely related nonhuman primates, will have been inherited by humans to a certain extent. Consequently, it is possible that the concept of defeat may have considerable utility in understanding human depression, anxiety, and suicidality.[125]

At this point, and following on from the above, it is useful to look at the latest finds on the neurobiology of suicide. Science has been looking for biological markers for suicide risk apart from psychiatric disorders in an effort to predict the risk of suicide. As summarized in the 2014 review article by Van Heeringen and Mann in the *Lancet*: "Although suicidal behaviour is heterogeneous and varies in degree and amount of clinical damage done, suicide deaths and non-fatal but highly lethal suicide attempts are similar from demographical, clinical, and neurobiological perspectives, and therefore probably have a common diathesis"[126] (diathesis being a trait-like susceptibility to suicidal behavior). "Most people with major psychiatric disorders never manifest suicidal behaviour, indicating the importance of diathesis in addition to a disorder. About 50% of the risk of suicide due to diathesis is inherited."[127] Moreover "Results from a range of studies using diverse designs and post-mortem and in-vivo techniques show impairments of the serotonin neurotransmitter system and the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis stress-response system in the diathesis for suicidal behavior."[128] It will be noted that these

[125] Taylor et al. 2011:392.
[126] Van Heeringen and Mann 2014:63.
[127] Ibid.
[128] Ibid.

are similar to the results in animal studies, and indeed animal studies are quoted in this *Lancet* paper.

Genetic factors are hypothesized to contribute to triggers in life events or the environment to increase the risk of suicidal behaviour: "molecular imaging studies have begun to identify the neural circuitry of suicidal behavior, and particularly, to implicate an abnormal serotonin system in more lethal suicidal behavior."[129] The brain circuitry identified is

> involved mainly in reappraisal, mood regulation, and particularly decision making, more specifically, the prediction of reward and punishment. Structural abnormalities might constitute a biological-trait susceptibility that explains maladaptive responses to stressors including an acute psychiatric illness or episode and adverse psychosocial events…Reports from neuroimaging and neuropsychological studies suggest that susceptible individuals overvalue signs of social rejection, as indicated by hyper reactivity to angry faces. This susceptibility resembles sensitivity to signals of defeat, which has been formulated in cognitive models of suicide. The involved brain circuitry determines the processes that individuals use to control cognitively which emotions they generate and then to decide how to deal with these emotions. Susceptible individuals might experience intense mental pain that they find difficult to control. Deficiencies in decision-making processes might restrict the extent of choices so that suicide might be considered the only way to stop the intense, unrelenting emotional pain.[130]

Accordingly, since "…early-life adversity and genetic factors might increase suicide risk through a moulding effect on brain circuitry and chemistry involved in reactivity to particular stressors" especially since "childhood adversity and a familial history of suicide are associated with a susceptibility to suicide", it is proposed to treat "the underlying and enduring susceptibility to suicidal behavior" through "genomics and brain imaging".[131]

[129] Ibid. 64.
[130] Ibid. 65-6.
[131] Ibid. 68-9.

"Neuroimaging could delineate brain regions and networks involved in suicide risk and could be a way to track the effect of interventions, which target such specific brain regions and neural networks."[132] I question, though, the likelihood of patients submitting to treatment that involves "repetitive transcranial magnetic stimulation directed at the dorsolateral cortex to modify functional activity in the orbitofrontal cortex, which might affect decision-making processes to decrease the likelihood of risky decisions and protect against suicide."[133] Much more likely, perhaps, is the possibility of "Novel psychopharmacological compounds that might reduce susceptibility to suicidal behavior" through drugs that affect processes in the brain.[134]

To return to *defeat and entrapment*, the 2011 review of literature by Taylor's team points out that in contrast to the animal world where "the concept of defeat can be readily defined in terms of ritualized agonistic encounters…defeat in humans may not be limited purely to the immediate social context… Instead any experience that signals a major failure of hierarchical aims, including the loss of a valued role, position, or resource, may lead to perceptions of defeat."[135] But defeat is not just any general experience of loss or failure. The studies indicate there must be "a sense of failed struggle concerning the loss or disruption of some valued status or internal hierarchical aims…*The idea that individuals feel that they have struggled against, or been beaten back by, the triggering circumstances is important* [my italics]."[136]

Entrapment is the perception that one is unable to escape stressful or defeating situations. Again, this is a subjective perception of circumstances as being "uncontrollable, unremitting and inescapable" whether by external events or internal thoughts and feelings, including lack of resources, a difficult job or relationship, health

[132] Ibid. 69.
[133] Ibid. 70.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Taylor et al. 2011:392.
[136] Ibid. 393.

problems, and aversive emotions.[137] The process appears to be one of *"ongoing appraisals of a situation, whereby the situation is judged to be inescapable, with no likelihood of rescue through either personal volition or the agency of others*."[138] [My italics]. It is hypothesized that defeat and entrapment comprise an "involuntary defeat strategy" which is "a genetically hard-wired psychobiological response to perceptions to defeat…analogous to those defensive strategies found to occur in animals in response to social defeat, inherited by humans form a common evolutionary ancestry."[139] This would link up with the studies in human neurobiology referred to above.

The Taylor review of literature looks at some six studies on suicidal behaviour to conclude that "defeat and entrapment appeared to have an impact above and beyond that explained by hopelessness", to add to understanding of suicidal behaviour. How exactly, though, does the mechanism work?

> Three elements are needed: a stressful event, feelings of defeat and entrapment and the proceeding to suicide. It is hypothesized that "these circumstances activate a psychobiological 'helplessness script', …which is evolutionarily designed to facilitate giving up and submission in individuals…and that maintenance of this script underlies suicidal behaviour. As an evolutionary mechanism, this helplessness script has developed to aid survival, and suicide is therefore best understood as a maladaptive reaction to this script that can occur in some individuals, such as those who lack effective strategies for eliciting help.[140]

Individual differences could explain differences in response to the three elements of the theory. "First, people are assumed to vary in their sensitivity to cues of defeat in their environment…Second, people are assumed to vary in escape potential, which is the judgment of their ability to escape from aversive situations through their own agency.

[137] Ibid.
[138] Ibid. 394.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Ibid. 408.

This concept has been operationalized in terms of social problem-solving ability and thus fits with the evidence of problem-solving deficits in suicidal individuals. Third, people are assumed to vary in perceptions of rescue factors, external sources of escape, often operationalized as social support. Fourth, it is suggested that in order to be suicidogenic, entrapment must be projected into the future in the form of hopelessness."[141]

Social Factors and Negative Life Events: social factors are involved in the development of suicidal behaviour: family history, exposure to suicidal behaviour of family or friends, suicide bereavement, depictions of suicide in the media, and access to means. Depending on susceptibility, life events such as childhood adversities, a difficult job or relationship, physical illnesses, trauma, abuse, bereavement and imprisonment are all risk factors for suicide.

3.1.3 Prevention Strategies: What Works to Prevent or Ameliorate Suicide Risk?

The previous section summarizes key points in the development of suicidal thinking and behaviour. Given that Sophocles' Ajax goes on to kill himself despite the appeals of wife and comrades, I could proceed immediately to discuss the play in the context of the above findings. However I would like to go further with the contemporary findings on what works or fails to work in reducing suicide risk and preventing suicides. This will assist us in understanding how Sophocles shapes events by isolating his protagonist not only through the external triggers of defeat and psychological distress, but also through the failures of Ajax's internal audience: the chorus of his men, and his wife Tecmessa. In particular, he dramatizes the failure of empathy, which by isolating the hero, exacerbated the likelihood of suicide. Towards the end of the play, the failings of empathy in the first half are partly ameliorated through the unlikeliest of characters, i.e. Odysseus.

[141] Ibid.

The WHO report summarizes prevention strategies as follows: universal, selective and indicative preventive strategies. *Universal* strategies are targeted at an entire population and include public education, reducing stigma and barriers to care, training of gatekeepers (health providers, teachers, police and military officers), reducing access to means of suicide (pesticides, firearms, heights, railway tracks, poisons, carbon monoxide), and reducing inappropriate media coverage. Means access has been successful at reducing suicide rates especially with pesticides, firearms, poisonous gases and pharmacological agents.[142] Limiting access to means plays on the fact that the suicidal crisis is often temporary: "Heightened suicide risk is often short term and situation specific. While suicidal thoughts may return, they are not permanent and an individual with previously suicidal thoughts and attempts can go on to live a long life."[143] Restricting access frustrates impulsive acts and provides the time for reconsideration during which the mental pain and psychological burdens may begin to lift. *Selective* preventive strategies target vulnerable groups based on factors such as age, sex, occupational status or family history, and include indigenous peoples, refugees, migrants, persons in detention centres and prisons, military veterans, groups discriminated against such as persons identifying as lesbians, gays, bisexual, transgender and intersex. These vulnerable groups have increased rates of suicide. *Indicative* preventive strategies target specific vulnerable individuals, such as previous attempters, self-harmers, patients with mental disorders, alcoholics and drug users, and the unemployed.

Crisis helplines such as the ones I have been involved in have now been established in many countries: Befrienders Worldwide is one umbrella organization to which 169 centres in 29 countries are presently affiliated. Its website contains links to centres all over the world.[144] The nature of the service in crisis hotlines (i.e. confidential

[142] WHO report 2014:33-34.
[143] WHO report 2014:47.
[144] See www.befrienders.org Accessed on 29.03.2017.

and anonymous) makes evaluation according to scientific protocols difficult. However, one study which interviewed callers in the US provides "empirical evidence that seriously suicidal individuals are reaching out to telephone crisis services. The clinical effectiveness of the crisis intervention is consistent with significant decreases in suicidality found during the course of the telephone session, and the continuing decrease in callers' hopelessness and psychological pain in the weeks following the crisis intervention."[145] This was replicated in later studies.[146] The WHO report reflects this position when it says, "Helplines have proved to be a useful and widely implemented best practice."[147] It goes on to say, "However, despite reducing suicide risk, the lack of evaluation means that there is no conclusive association with reducing suicide rates."[148]

The issue of *social isolation and the absence of social support* is one which I want to explore further. As the WHO report says: "Access to emotional support at the right time can prevent suicide."[149] The *Lancet* article sums this up: "Social isolation and the absence of social support are established correlates of suicide risk, and are important components of contemporary models of suicidal behaviour. Any assessment of suicide risk should, as a matter of course, assess the extent to which a vulnerable individual is socially isolated."[150]

Both the theories discussed above include this as a key component of assessment and prevention. In the 'Cry of Pain' theory, "social support was found to buffer the effect of escape potential on suicide risk…The data from this study point to the value of emotional / informational support and positive social interaction in buffering against suicide risk. The items which tapped the emotional / informational dimension are

[145] Gould et al. 2007:350.
[146] Tyson et al. 2016; Ramchand et al. 2017.
[147] WHO 2014:39.
[148] Ibid.
[149] Ibid. 43.
[150] O'Connor and Nock 2014:79.

concerned with the availability of support during times of stress."[151] Support included having someone to share with and socialize with. The IPT also builds a large part of its theory on the frustration of social connections in its categories of thwarted belongingness and burdensomeness. Conversely, "the presence of a social network is a protective factor against suicide."[152] The nature of this social support needs exploring: what helps and what does not help? At which point: before or after a statement of suicidal intent? We have seen above that significant others often react with silence when hearing such statements and that even clinicians are often uncomfortable discussing suicide. We have also seen that a large number of patients lie to professionals in order to be released from hospitalization and proceed to suicide. Exploring the reasons why may help us understand treatments and behaviours that could contribute to positive outcomes of reduced suicide risk.

The current situation on treatment efficacy is summed up in the 2014 *Lancet* review: "Unfortunately, few well-established evidence-based treatments for suicidal behavior are available, such as prevention programmes, pharmacological interventions, and psychological treatments. Treatments targeting depression have not been shown to reduce suicidal thoughts or behaviours."[153] Cognitive behaviour therapy programmes show some promise; however, "investigators noted a publication bias in this topic, with a funnel plot of published studies centring close to zero, smaller studies reporting more positive effect sizes, and no published study findings showing negative effects for any intervention."[154]

To access the practical reality, I now look at some studies with people who have attempted suicide and survived, since that is the closest we can approach to defining 'what works'. Attempters are at high-risk for subsequent successful completed suicide, and

[151] O'Connor 2003:306.
[152] Joiner et al. 2005:302.
[153] O'Connor and Nock 2014:80.
[154] Ibid. 81.

mental health practitioners are aware of this fact when assessing these patients for follow-up care. However, such high-risk patients often decline or discontinue treatment after being discharged. Motto and Bostrom state that "The problem of patients' refusing follow-up care is widespread, ranging from 11% to 50% of patients in various studies."[155] While in some cases, home visits and personal contact helped increase compliance with treatment, patients often resisted being treated for physical conditions or to being labelled "psychiatric cases".

In Motto and Bostrom's 2001 study, a group of more than 400 patients who had refused ongoing care were contacted by letter at least four times a year for five years. Each letter was an expression of concern, always worded differently, addressing the concerns of the patient, and offering support; "we hoped to show that our intention was simply and entirely to let the person know that we remained aware of his or her existence and maintained positive feelings towards him or her. One such letter was not expected to have much impact, but we believed that the cumulative effect of repeated contacts of this kind might have considerable psychological force."[156] The study found that "during the period of maximum contact, year one, and during the subsequent year, the suicide rate was significantly lower in the contact group than in the control group."[157] The researchers hypothesized that the connection offered the patients via the letters acted as a "stabilizing force in emotional life" and "a sense of connectedness to others". Variants of Motto and Bostrom's study using letters have included contact by postcard, letters written by Samaritans in Scotland – all methods "carried out with very modest resources of space, equipment, and personnel."[158]

Significant for cross-cultural understanding of suicide, and corroborating Motto and Bostrom's study, is a multisite study combining data from five participating sites

[155] Motto and Bostrom 2001:828.
[156] Ibid. 829.
[157] Ibid. 831.
[158] Ibid. 833.

using the same research protocol.[159] Between January 2002 and April 2004 five sites, one each in Brazil, India, Sri Lanka, Iran and China, recruited a total of 1,867 suicide attempters who were offered "brief intervention and contact" (BIC), comprising an information session and nine follow-up contacts (calls or visits) for a period of eighteen months. A control group comprised suicide attempters who were discharged after physical treatment and not contacted. The results showed more deaths from all causes including suicide in the control group compared to the BIC group across all five sites. As the study says, BIC "…enhanced a feeling of connectedness. Also, systematic follow-up contacts gave the patient a feeling of being seen and heard by someone."[160]

Turning to persons hospitalized for attempting suicide, what has been helpful or not in the treatment of such patients? The usual treatment is medical / psychiatric, accompanied by observation. There has been growing dissatisfaction with these practices in recent years from a number of perspectives. An editorial in a 2015 issue of *Crisis*, the journal of the American Psychological Association devoted to suicidology, expressed the dissatisfaction of a group of clinicians with the increasing emphasis on empirical research.[161] While agreeing to the utility of epidemiological studies for the creation of policy, as clinicians they decry "the pullulation of epidemiological studies...the current emphasis on counting and quantification."[162] They find these multiplying studies distracting from "the necessary study of the inner lives of patients. Too little attention is now paid to the mental experiences (subjective and objective) of suicidal patients."[163] And little in the compendium of forty-nine pages of risk factors in the APA's 2003 guideline for assessment and treatment of suicidal patients directs attention to "subjective experiences of patients and their manners of relating to others."[164]

[159] Fleischmann 2008.
[160] Ibid. 707.
[161] Maltsberger et al. 2015.
[162] Ibid. 388.
[163] Ibid.
[164] Ibid.

The editorial continues by pointing out that the introduction of Prozac in 1987 propelled the psychopharmacological treatment of mental illness to such an extent that "the chemical emphasis drug treatments offer has shaped our ways of approaching and thinking about patients, lending an added impersonal emphasis. The tendency has been for suicide studies to become more mechanical and remote from patient experience."[165] "The human condition cannot be reduced to a series of risk factors and correlations; the drive to empiricism, as helpful as it is on the one hand, risks drowning out other ways of understanding people on the other…we need to free ourselves from the constriction of general, homogenizing diagnosis. We need more reports that reflect the deeper experiences of our patients, including more qualitative research. These fuller and deeper studies are essential, and there must be a place for them alongside empirical work."[166] The editorial ends with a reference to Shneidman's emphasis on connecting with clients.

The shift to more qualitative studies have been taking place, especially among psychiatric / mental health nurses who have a long history of providing care to suicidal persons, given the association between mental health problems and suicide.[167] According to Cutcliffe and Stevenson, authors of a 2008 review, the "care" of suicidal patients practiced has been predominantly "defensive" in nature, focused on meeting the needs of the organization and preventing the person from physically harming himself, driven by fear of litigation. Treatment comprises psychotropic drug treatment, physical restraints, and "close observations" by nurses or untrained persons or through remote surveillance in "seclusion rooms". Such practices are driven by custodial rather than therapeutic concerns; yet there are no empirical studies of their impact on suicide rates.

However, audits of such practices suggest that they are not effective: in one 2001 study, 18% of all completed inpatient suicides occurred while people were under

[165] Ibid. 388.
[166] Ibid. 389.
[167] Cutcliffe and Stevenson 2008.

observation.[168] More troubling is a 1999 report that 10% of patients reported lying about their degree of suicidality in order to speed up their discharge from constant observation.[169] Indeed "Suicide attempters who present to hospital services are at much greater risk to die from suicide in the first year following the attempt: sixty-six times the annual risk in the general population."[170] As the authors conclude, there is little evidence that we "can 'treat' or 'care' for people with sophisticated, complex, multi-dimensional problems by preventing the physical means of attempting suicide, and hoping that the suicidal person spontaneously resolves whatever problems (and psychache) that ushered them towards suicide in the first place."[171] ("Psychache" is the term used by Shneidman to describe the psychological anguish driving suicidal behaviour).

As for psychotropic medications, these are prescribed because of the link between depression and suicide. However as also detailed above, "…suicide does NOT necessarily equate with depression or mental illness; though it is abundantly clear that it CAN" which suggests "the need for a re-think of the role of (anti-depressant) medication as the 'mainstay' in the treatment of suicidal people."[172] The need then is to engage with the suicidal person:

> the undeniable fact that suicide is a human drama, played out in the everyday lives, minds, brains and interactions of people…caring for suicidal people must be an interpersonal endeavor; and one personified by talking and listening."[173] Since "a sense of pervasive hopelessness" informs the suicidal, a "theory of hope inspiration" is needed; yet, "hope cannot be commanded or ordered…one cannot 'force' people to become less suicidal. There is a striking relationship between hope and caring…Each theory of hope inspiration [e.g. from working with the terminally ill, or persons experiencing schizophrenia or complicated grief] made

[168] Ibid. 945.
[169] Ibid.
[170] Ibid. 947.
[171] Ibid.
[172] Ibid. 949.
[173] Ibid. 950.

> direct/indirect reference to how the presence of another human being, who demonstrates unconditional acceptance, tolerance and understanding, as (s)he enters into the caring practice, simultaneously inspires hope…the caring relationship (or re-connection with humanity) might be developed as a 'hope-inspiring' form of engagement. Care of the suicidal person is predicated on engagement (re-connection) with the person.[174]

Cutcliffe et al. 2006 conducted a qualitative study of the response of twenty psychiatric patients to determine if psychiatric / mental health nurses provide meaningful caring responses to suicidal persons and if so, how. The authors point out that qualitative methods are relatively rare, yet methodological pluralism is needed in a phenomenon as multi-dimensional as suicide. Qualitative studies are to "provide an important and complimentary approach to quantitative analysis and, in combination with the results from quantitative studies, will enable a more comprehensive understanding of suicide."[175]

The study yielded a core variable: "re-connecting the person with humanity". This begins with the patient gaining trust in the nurse, mainly through "experiencing intense, warm, care-based human to human contact".[176] Such care had a profound effect on the patient, and made them feel they were not alone, and that they mattered to someone. "Being able to talk about their feelings, thoughts and experiences without any sense of judgment was a liberating and emancipatory experience." "In essence, the nurse in this way helps the person begin to internalize that he/she can still engage and connect with humanity." The actual words of patients as recorded in this study are similar to words volunteers hear or read in the course of their service.

A little later in the relationship, the nurse begins gently challenging the "suicidal constructs" of the patient, prompting reflection and reconsideration of previous perceptions, as influenced by their previous state of hopelessness. The patient is guided

[174] Ibid. 950.
[175] Cutcliffe et al. 2006:793.
[176] Ibid. 797.

back to humanity in this way, with the nurse helping to nurture insight and understanding; this enables the patient to gain control over his thoughts and feelings by re-framing constricted thoughts and actions, and supporting and strengthening beliefs from before the attempt. All this happens within a secure environment in which the patient feels cared for and supported.

Patients often expressed that they were "extremely reluctant to share any of their thoughts and feelings with friends and family, as they feared this would somehow harm their significant other. Feelings are expressed sparingly within the family for fear of causing pain or risking alienation."[177] Such feelings could not extend to the nurse carer and in my view, are analogous to the relief of confiding in a stranger over a helpline or similar service.

The encounters with the nurse are strengthening as well in the way of permitting meaning-making to go on—i.e. making sense of the suicide attempt, which is active and focused as opposed to the apathy and ambivalence of their previous suicidal state. This involves re-visiting previous constructs (e.g 'I can't do anything right') and re-engaging with everyday tasks and habits. Key to the success of the method was the abilities of the nurse to be co-present with the patient i.e. to "be able to hold back from being too instrumental", to "be able to 'sit' with both the patient's and their own emotions that surround the near experience of death" and to be "comfortable with talking about death and suicide…[and with] emotionally charged interpersonal interactions."[178]

The authors caution against the generalizability of these findings given the nature of the research method and the study design. However, over the past two decades there has been increasing interest in such qualitative studies. One review of studies into nurses working with suicidal patients in 2011[179] identified twenty-six such studies between 1988

[177] Ibid. 799.
[178] Ibid. 801.
[179] Talseth and Gilje 2011.

and 2008 involving 2,667 nurses, 40% working in oncology and 10% in psychiatry. A recent 2017 study also using qualitative methods extends this work by highlighting challenges faced by nurses, and supports the conclusions of Cutcliffe and Stevenson from their 2006 and 2008 studies.[180] More patient-centred and collaborative protocols are being devised. One recent paper described "therapeutic alliances" between carer and patients that involved interviews and feedback over a period of two years and had positive outcomes with patients.[181]

Cutcliffe and Stevenson, in their 2008 study, concludes by quoting from Shneidman: "There is a basic rule to keep in mind: We can reduce the lethality if we lessen the anguish, the perturbation. Suicidal individuals who are asked, 'Where do you hurt?' intuitively know that this is a question about their emotions and their lives, and they answer appropriately, not in biological terms but with some literary or humanistic sophistication, in psychological terms. What I mean by this is to ask about the person's feelings, worries and pain."[182]

Listening to sufferers, taking their stories, are beginning to appear more and more in studies and in the literature. The synthesis of the IPT in 2010 contains case reports and not only empirical studies.[183] The essence of befriending that applies in the voluntary field is being applied more and more in professional contexts. The heart of helping and healing suicidal individuals appears to lie in connection, in the relationship of the carer and the sufferer, whether the carer be a therapist, a nurse or a lay-person.

3.1.4 Summary of Contemporary Suicide Research

[180] Hagen et al. 2017.
[181] Gysin-Maillart et al. 2017.
[182] Cutcliffe and Stevenson 2008: 950-1, quoting from Shneidman's *The Suicidal Mind*.
[183] Van Orden et al. 2010.

As we embark on a study of Sophocles' *Ajax*, I want us to keep the following key findings and concepts in mind. After a life event such as a failure, defeat, illness triggers a crisis, the following psychological states and actions often characterize the suicidal person:

- psychological pain and anguish, or "psychache"
- hopelessness and deep pessimism for the future
- profound isolation and loneliness, being alienated from the wider community
- cognitive rigidity or constriction, a narrowing of options, limited problem-solving ability
- dichotomous thinking, organizing thought in polar opposites and extremes
- obsessive rumination on past failures and present impasse
- selective recall of unhappy or pessimistic memories
- language and images associated with death, "flash-forwards" to images of death and its aftermath
- ambivalence, simultaneously wanting to die and wanting to live
- sense of having struggled and failed, been defeated, feelings especially exacerbated in persons with perfectionist tendencies, especially of socially-prescribed perfectionism
- regarding oneself as a burden on others, with death releasing them as well as oneself
- death is perceived as release from the relentless pain of the current situation
- communication often occurs when the person seeks help until the period just before the act is attempted, when communication dries up.

States of mind and behaviours alone do not predict suicide, even as many of the above combine to increase emotional intensity and suicidal ideation. But suicide may result if the individual has acquired the capability for self-harm from life experiences or habituation to violence. Military personnel are at higher risk: while the bonds of

comradeship are a protective factor, an excessive motivation to excel and loss of status can trigger a suicidal crisis in servicemen, which habituation to violence and access to means then renders more likely.

We are to also keep in mind what helps and does not help:

- Since the crisis is transient and temporary, blocking the exits, removing the means and staying with the affected person through this period is vital
- Exhorting the person not to think or feel as they do, to suppress the thoughts and feelings, increases the risk while reminding them of loved ones either does not penetrate the emotional and cognitive fog or feeds into the perception that since they are a burden, their loved ones will be better off by their death
- Providing a human connection through empathy, warmth, non-judgmental acceptance, a form of hope transfusion through the presence of caring others
- Engaging them in understanding their inner lives and dilemmas within a supportive relationship.

As expressed by Morgan in his review of suicide prevention measures over the past 600 years: "there is surely at least one common theme throughout the centuries, whatever other continuing threads there may be, perhaps disguised by mere changes in terminology: it is the provision of human contact, the comfort of another concerned person, often authoritative but maybe not, conveying a message of hope consonant with the assumptions and values relevant to that particular time."[184]

3.2 Sophocles' *Ajax* and its Portrayal of Suicide

In the light of the above contemporary findings and the discussion of emotionalism in Greek tragedy and the ancient views of suicide in Chapter One, I will now examine how Sophocles shapes and dramatizes the crisis of the iconic suicide of Ajax, keeping in mind

[184] Morgan 1989:637.

that "In Sophocles the suicide is the dead centre of a single play overshadowing everything else."[185] The emotional impact of the suicide upon audiences became the stuff of theatrical legend in antiquity: Libanius says that the audiences were reduced to tears by it just as they were by the plight of the Greeks in Phrynichus' notorious tear-jerking tragedy *Capture of Miletus* (*Oration* 14.20.13-16).[186] Everything is telescoped into the single play, unlike Aeschylus' trilogy, and a single night and day. The contest for the arms is over. Ajax, enraged at being denied the arms, has attempted to kill the Atreidai in revenge and has been prevented by Athena. The focus of the action is clearly arranged so as to focus on the *aftermath* of this conflict—i.e. the effect of failure and humiliation on Ajax and their consequences for himself, his *philoi* and the wider community. In other words, this is a *psychological* study of the ruined hero, much as the *Electra* is a concentrated study of revenge, taken out of the broader context of the myth of the family of Atreus.

At the end of Chapter Two I concluded that Sophocles most likely modified the mythic sources by introducing the following innovations: the hostility of Athena and the attack on the commanders. I shall now discuss how these factors work dramatically and psychologically to make explicable the suicide. In addition, I show how the depiction of the chorus and Tecmessa, and the absence of Teucer, are dramatized to accentuate the complete isolation of Ajax, resulting in an inward turn expressed in Ajax's conduct and speech. In a close discussion of the language and performance values, I shall also demonstrate the manner in which the dramatic characterizations of this crisis reflect the emotional, psychological and behavioural states defined by modern psychologists as described in the first half (3.1) of this chapter.

[185] Golder 1990: 13.
[186] See Evans 1991: 69.

3.2.1 The prologue

The play's opening begins in action and with a puzzle to be solved: who has slaughtered the cattle of the army and the herdsmen guarding the flock? Odysseus has tracked the culprit to the camp of Ajax. Then he meets Athena, who confirms that Ajax is indeed the man he seeks, and is inside the camp, dripping sweat in his sword-wielding hands:

> ἔνδον γὰρ ἀνὴρ ἄρτι τυγχάνει, κάρα
> στάζων ἱδρῶτι καὶ χέρας ξιφοκτόνους.(9-10)
> Yes, the man is now inside, his face and hands that have slaughtered with the sword dripping with sweat.[187]

Odysseus is grateful for the confirmation but he is unsure as to the meaning of the actions uncovered. Athena confirms these are the actions of Ajax (39). The twenty-five lines of *stichomythia* that follow reveal Odysseus' incredulity at the actions that so nearly result in slaying of the Argives. He cannot make sense of it, and his interrogation of Athena is an attempt to understand it: Who? How? When? Why? This emphasis reinforces the idea that Sophocles was the first to introduce the attack on the commanders. Odysseus' shock at the attack would parallel the audience's with the result that, as Heath and Okell put it, "Sophocles has sprung on his audience a more extreme and more starkly problematic Ajax"[188] than any the audience had previously known.

I argue below that this extreme and problematic Ajax's attempt on the commanders is an echo of Achilles in Book 1 of the *Iliad*. Most importantly, the attempt and its failure serve to convert Ajax into an enemy of the Greeks, isolating him in ways that the earlier versions of Ajax did not. As discussed in chapter 2, the epic Ajax appears to commit suicide out of shame at the dishonour of losing the conflict of the arms. In

[187] All translations are from Sophocles, Volume I. *Ajax. Electra. Oedipus Tyrannus* (Loeb Classical Library No. 20) by Sophocles, edited and translated by Hugh Lloyd-Jones (1994) Harvard University Press.
[188] Heath and Okell 2007: 366.

Sophocles' version, Athena is instrumental, not only in preventing the attack, but in humiliating Ajax by diverting the attack onto livestock:

> ἐγὼ δὲ φοιτῶντ᾽ ἄνδρα μανιάσιν νόσοις
> ὥτρυνον, εἰσέβαλλον εἰς ἕρκη κακά.(59-60)
> And as the man wandered in the madness that afflicted him, I urged him on and drove him into a cruel trap.

She displays the crazed man to Odysseus, much to the latter's discomfiture; he does not wish to confront a madman, thus emphasizing the madness and preparing the audience for what is to come. Athena promises to prevent Ajax confronting his enemy by darkening Ajax's eyes, another motif that will echo in the play, that of dark and light:[189]

> ἐγὼ σκοτώσω βλέφαρα καὶ δεδορκότα. (85)
> I shall place his eyes in darkness, even though they see.

Why is the madness repeatedly emphasized? Since the myth clearly preserves the lives of the Atreidai, Ajax's rage must be deflected; he must fail and that failure drive the suicide. Here we have an act within an act within an act: Athena and Ajax converse, while Odysseus remains a silent witness, mimicking both chorus and audience.[190] The display confirms Ajax in his madness, for he labours under the belief that he has killed the Atreidai: prompted by Athena, he proudly confirms this three times. This is Ajax at the pinnacle of his imagined though mistaken triumph: he has taken vengeance on his enemies, slaughtered them and even now believes himself to be torturing his main enemy Odysseus. Burnett suggests that since Athena is staging the event, the audience is expected to look on the mad Ajax as "an entertainment and a sign to be read…What is

[189] See Cohen 1978: 27-9.
[190] This metatheatrical use of Odysseus as witness is well brought out in Faulkner 1993.

shown is not a tableau of failure and madness, for what is actually displayed is the revenger Ajax as he would have been, if only he had been allowed to keep his normal eyesight...what we (and Odysseus) look at is an ecstasy of rage..."[191] I take issue with the word "entertainment": for the ancient Athenian audience who venerated the hero, I suggest that the audience is meant to pattern their response on Odysseus in the presence of Athena. And a culture that upheld the principle of "helping friends and injuring enemies", and cultivated revenge as a value,[192] would regard the maddened Ajax with much less revulsion perhaps than moderns.

The subsequent exchange between Athena and Odysseus shows the depth of Ajax's fall (119-20) and the power of Athena in bringing it about. Yet it is the reaction of Odysseus that may well be Sophocles' innovation: invited to laugh at the downfall of his enemy, he is instead moved to pity:

> ἐποικτίρω δέ νιν
> δύστηνον ἔμπας, καίπερ ὄντα δυσμενῆ,
> ὀθούνεκ᾽ ἄτῃ συγκατέζευκται κακῇ,
> οὐδὲν τὸ τούτου μᾶλλον ἢ τοὐμὸν σκοπῶν:
> ὁρῶ γὰρ ἡμᾶς οὐδὲν ὄντας ἄλλο πλὴν
> εἴδωλ᾽ ὅσοιπερ ζῶμεν ἢ κούφην σκιάν. (121-6)
>
> I know of none, and I pity him in his misery, though he is my enemy, because he is bound fast by a cruel affliction, not thinking of his fate, but my own; because I see that all of us who live are nothing but ghosts, or a fleeting shadow.

Odysseus displays empathy: imagining himself in the place of his enemy and pitying the disaster that has destroyed him, pity that the audience is invited to share.

[191] Burnett 1998: 81.
[192] See e.g. Herman 2000.

Sophocles achieves another important dramatic purpose in the prologue: displaying the mad Ajax is the proof needed of the truth that Athena commands Odysseus to proclaim to the army as supported by the evidence of his own eyes:

> δείξω δὲ καὶ σοὶ τήνδε περιφανῆ νόσον,
> ὡς πᾶσιν Ἀργείοισιν εἰσιδὼν θροῇς.(66-7)
> And I will show this madness openly to you also, so that you may tell all the Argives what you have seen.

Up to this point in the action, all has been confusion and surmise: it is the certainty, demonstrated by a goddess and related by Odysseus, that Ajax is the perpetrator of the deeds of attempted murder and deflected only by divine interference, that will convert the entire Greek army into enemies, and imbue the entire situation with danger for Ajax and his dependents. The notion of Greek army enmity fills the chorus with dread, and Tecmessa with fear for herself and their child. The danger is dramatized later in the reception of Teucer by the army as relayed by the Messenger, and the conduct of Menelaus and Agamemnon in the aftermath of the suicide. The purpose of such all-encompassing enmity, of the conversion of friends into enemies, is the isolation of the protagonist.[193] Yet the prologue also shows us one enemy who does not mock the disgraced hero. Already, Sophocles is inverting expectations.

The choice of Athena is significant. As discussed above, the extant epic and poetic sources name Athena as prompting the award of the arms to Odysseus and in that sense she is not favourable to Ajax. But there is nothing in the sources reflecting Sophocles' back story in which Ajax had incurred the wrath of the goddess by scorning her help during battle. Instead the choice of Athena underscores the parallels with Achilles. In

[193] Ajax's isolation is well brought out by Worman 2001.

Book 1 of the *Iliad*, Achilles has been dishonoured by Agamemnon declaring he would deprive Achilles of his prize, when Athena arrives and stops Achilles from taking immediate revenge on Agamemnon. Achilles obeys the goddess and, dissuaded from action, goes away to supplicate his mother for help.

In contrast, Sophocles has Ajax disobeying Athena in an earlier episode; therefore when he attempts vengeance against the Atreidai (also the enemies of Achilles in most of the *Iliad*) it is the same goddess who, knowing the futility of offering him aid in the manner of Achilles, acts to defeat him by "darkening his vision" and punishing his *hubris* with madness. Read in this manner, Ajax becomes almost a double of Achilles; Achilles' incipient doubts about the warrior code triggered by the quarrel and loss of Briseis resulting in the humiliation of the greatest Greek hero, are transformed by Sophocles into the complete humiliation and disillusionment of Ajax, a disillusionment that results in a chosen self-destruction. In the *Iliad* we hear no more about Achilles' doubts and rage; these are subsumed in his revenge for the death of Patroclus and partly assuaged by the reparation performed by Agamemnon for the original insult. Achilles' desire for vengeance, and the very rage that characterized his enmity of the Greeks, force him back within the conventional warrior revenge ethic which makes him redirect his rage against Hector and the Trojans.

The denial of the arms is the disappointment of the normative expectation in this warrior society that the next greatest Greek hero after Achilles should be honoured. It calls forth a deeper crisis, to which suicide becomes the sole honourable solution. Ajax's vengeance being deflected, his rage has no outlet. Achilles had appealed to the gods for help, but Sophocles has removed that option from his Ajax, by rendering him an enemy to Athena. *Every modification of the myth by Sophocles serves to push Ajax into the supreme crisis that makes his suicide explicable both in ancient terms and in those of twentieth- and twenty-first century psychology.* (My emphasis.)

The prologue gives us two responses to the dilemma of Ajax. The first is Athena's punishment coupled with gloating and invitation to mock the deluded Ajax's *hubris* when hers is the power: one day can bring a man low or lift him up. The second is Odysseus' in his unexpected humility and empathy for his erstwhile enemy. We shall keep this in mind as we encounter the chorus' and Tecmessa's responses to the humiliated Ajax: do they demonstrate the empathy of Ajax's expected enemy? We shall see Odysseus once again demonstrating empathy at the end of the play, forming a symmetry with the beginning. The greatest empathy is shown by Ajax's rival, who in Homer's *Odyssey*, fruitlessly seeks reconciliation with an intransigent Ajax in the underworld. *Od.* XI.541-64

Modern scholars, readers and audiences are troubled by the extremity of the revenge and violence proposed by this murderous attempt on the commanders, one that Achilles avoids only by obeying Athena. Yet Achilles in the *Iliad* was also regarded as impious in his maltreatment of Hector's body, and it is only through the intervention of the gods, that he is prevailed upon to release the body. The climactic scene in book XXIV in which Achilles recognizes the common bond between himself and Priam, mediated through the grief of fathers and sons, impels him into voluntarily giving up the body of Hector, and ameliorates his earlier impiety, but Achilles never expresses any remorse over his earlier actions: they are presumably justified by his grief and vengeance. Ajax never signifies any remorse either for his murderous attempt and dies cursing the Atreidai and the entire Greek army. As Gregory says in her article 'Sophocles' *Ajax* and his Homeric Prototypes', "Although the parallel with Achilles is only partial, it redounds to Ajax's credit, for it shows his homicidal project in a less abhorrent light."[194]

3.2.2 The Chorus and Tecmessa

[194] Gregory 2017: 147.

After this fraught opening, the chorus of Ajax's men enters. Events have moved on from the prologue: Odysseus has done Athena's bidding. The chorus has heard of the slaughter of the flock, and rumours of Ajax's involvement, though nothing is said of the attack on the commanders. Uncertainty, fear and foreboding characterize the chorus almost throughout the play; the one point at which they celebrate and rejoice is after the deception speech when they will be revealed to be mistaken in their expectations. The chorus are clearly social inferiors and dependents, and their fear is naturally for themselves as much as for their master. In front of the tent of Ajax, the chorus call on Ajax to rise up, and scotch the rumours in language with Homeric echoes, especially of Achilles from the *Iliad:* IX.247, XVIII.178. The doors open but a woman comes out, confounding expectation in a manner we shall witness again and again. Tecmessa's opening address to the chorus announces their Athenian lineage: we are not in Homeric times but in the fifth century, when Ajax is already a titular Athenian hero and his sailors come from Attica. Her description of Ajax forms a bridge between his appearance in the prologue and his reappearance in the next scenes: she narrates the events of the night from her perspective and Ajax's recovery from madness, and immediate responses. Her very first description summons a vision of the mighty hero brought low:

> νῦν γὰρ ὁ δεινὸς μέγας ὠμοκρατὴς
> Αἴας θολερῷ
> κεῖται χειμῶνι νοσήσας. (205-7)
> For now the dread, the mighty Ajax, harsh in his might, lies low, stricken by a turbid storm of sickness.

The chorus immediately fear the worst (227-32) i.e. public execution, and Tecmessa's recital puts to an end all doubts that Ajax is the perpetrator of the night's events. She spells out the grim perverted actions by which their leader mutilated and tormented the animals, while speaking terrible insults, taught by a god (243-4), provoking in the chorus

the desire to flee: either on foot while veiled or sailing away (245-50) to escape the threats of the commanders and avoid sharing the imminent death by stoning of the mad man (253-56). Hearing this Tecmessa hastens to assure them that Ajax has grown calm and recovered his sanity, with the result that he suffers fresh pangs of pain, from his self-inflicted sufferings (257-62). The chorus takes spurious comfort from this and looks forward to a hasty forgetting of the episode and the cessation of their current troubles (263-4). It needs Tecmessa patiently to point out to them that Ajax and their troubles are in fact multiplied: Ajax has recovered to fresh suffering in which his dependents are included. At their request, and in recognition of the share they have in Ajax's suffering (284), she embarks on a longer description of the events which she had earlier summarized in the first lyric exchanges with the chorus.

In her description, we see an Ajax who behaves stealthily, creeping out of his tent on a midnight mission. Tecmessa tries but is unable to stop him. She attests once again to his return and the killing and torture of the cattle, but also to the conversation out of doors with a "shadow", who the external audience knows is Athena (301-2). The succeeding information is new: Ajax's sanity returned slowly but on seeing the surrounding devastation, he struck his head, cried out then fell among the slaughtered sheep and sat there, gripping his hair in his hands (307-10), recalling Achilles prostrate at the news of the death of Patroclus. Ajax sat silent for a long time, presumably attempting to piece together in his own mind the events of the night, before demanding that Tecmessa explain what had happened (311-16), which she does. His resulting frenzied cries shocked her as being utterly out of character for him (317-22). The shrill lamentations ended with Ajax sitting among the corpses, quiet, not eating or drinking (323-5) prompting Tecmessa's fearful pronunciation that the ominous silence portends something dreadful, a first hint of possible suicide:

καὶ δῆλός ἐστιν ὥς τι δρασείων κακόν.(326)
and it is clear that he plans to do some evil

It is in search of help that Tecmessa has emerged and she ends with an appeal to the chorus to go in and help the stricken man, assuming that their words have the ability to win over Ajax (328-30). Yet at hearing the first offstage cries, the chorus, which had taken comfort from the news of Ajax's recovery, fear that he will become worse again, either from madness or pain (337-8).

Within the argument that I am making, this re-telling by Tecmessa of events the external audience has already witnessed serves to establish that Ajax has recovered his sanity and knowledge of his true situation. Learning of the failure of his enterprise and the depth of his humiliation, he has been shocked into cries and lamentations in a manner totally uncharacteristic of the hero. This is an intimation of the deep crisis that has befallen the man: he is recognizably not himself, and we see this mirrored in the responses of incomprehension and fear that greet him when he bursts onto the stage clothed in the gory evidence of his night's work.

Silence is often the prelude to suicide: Eurydice in *Antigone* (1243) exits in silence to her death, as does Deianeira in *Trachiniae* (812) though we hear of the latter's actions from her nurse. It would not have been inconceivable for Sophocles to have ended Ajax's life here and had the news relayed. But the drama is only in this initial phase.

3.2.3 The failed *kommos* (348-429)

Ajax's first cries, heard off-stage, are for himself (333), next for his son (336), and then he calls for Teucer, his closest adult relative (342-3). In the absence of Teucer, his thoughts turn to his men. Entering on the *ekkyklema*, surrounded by bloodied carcasses, he addresses the chorus in agitated dochmiacs:

ἰὼ
φίλοι ναυβάται, μόνοι ἐμῶν φίλων,
μόνοι ἔτ᾽ ἐμμένοντες ὀρθῷ νόμῳ,
ἴδεσθέ μ᾽ οἷον ἄρτι κῦμα φοινίας ὑπὸ ζάλης
ἀμφίδρομον κυκλεῖται. (348-53)

Hail, dear sailors, the only ones among my friends who still abide by the rule of loyalty, see what kind of a wave, sent up by a deadly surge, circles rapidly about me!

The wave surge that circles around him accurately describes the metaphorical storm that whirls him around, and psychologically disorientates him utterly and from which he looks for rescue. Already, the language of isolation and polarities appears in his speech. "μόνοι" is repeated, his men are his only friends; he commands them to look at him, *idesthe*, the imperative "look!" He is alone and he is looking to them, alone, as his only friends in the bloody storm that has engulfed him. This is a communication of deep distress, a reaching out for help and support.

But the chorus, in a stark rejection of this appeal, turns away to address Tecmessa: she is mistaken, he is still mad (354-5), they say. Shocked at his appearance, expecting an Ajax restored to calm, they cannot deal with an impassioned, grieving Ajax. This Ajax is a stranger, whom they are not even able to face. Ajax tries again, addressing them as fellow sailors, repeating "you alone":

σέ τοι σέ τοι μόνον δέδορκα πημονὰν ἐπαρκέσοντ᾽:
ἀλλά με συνδάϊξον.(359-61)

you, you are the only guardians I see who will help me! Come, kill me with the rest!

Only they can be his defence against misery, if they join in killing him: a first reference to suicide from Ajax. This is surely not a command to kill him since that is an act Ajax is capable of committing himself: this is a cry for understanding of his plight, how he is being killed, destroyed. But this plea also elicits a denial: the chorus beseeches him not to speak in that way, and not to compound his evils with the evil remedy of suicide (362-3); a second rejection since they are refusing to hear.

Ajax tries a third time, again calling them to look at him at his present condition, and confirm him in his misery, and fall from his glory:

> ὁρᾷς τὸν θρασύν, τὸν εὐκάρδιον,
> τὸν ἐν δαΐοις ἄτρεστον μάχαις,
> ἐν ἀφόβοις με θηρσὶ δεινὸν χέρας;(364-6)
> Do you see that I, the bold, the valiant, the one who never trembled in battle among enemies, have done mighty deeds among beasts that frightened no one?

Ajax is singing his despair at his utter disgrace, transformed beyond recognition, from the proud warrior in battle to a slayer of cattle, and hence a figure of mockery, even as the visual tableau of the *ekkyklema* reinforce his words. This third time, the chorus is entirely silent, unresponsive, in unspoken reprimand. We saw that family members of suicidal persons often respond with silence, and how unhelpful this is, and how a failure to engage with the suicidal serves to increase the risk of suicide, not decrease it.

Goldhill, in a close reading of this scene, comments on how distant the chorus are, and on the musical elements that reflect the different emotional registers, the chorus speaking in iambic trimeters while Ajax sings in impassioned lyrics. "The chorus' iambic distance and attempt at restraint is set in opposition to Ajax's emotional appeals and despairing outbursts."[195] But it is not only distance and restraint that characterize the

[195] Goldhill 2012:93.

chorus: as pointed out above, they actively attempt to shut Ajax down by direct speech and by silence, non-response. This denial amounts to a refusal to hear him, a failure of empathy.

It is Tecmessa who responds to this third appeal of Ajax, speaking directly to him, unlike the chorus, but only to appeal to Ajax *not* to say these things:

> μή, δέσποτ᾽ Αἴας, λίσσομαί σ᾽, αὔδα τάδε. (368)
> Lord Ajax, do not, I beg you, say such things!

She too is unable to hear him. This makes Ajax turn on her (369), establishing what Goldhill calls "direct contact, but only to break it".[196] But this direct contact is a response to a denial of his pain, and refusal of empathy.

Ajax ignores Tecmessa's next plea (371) and continues to sing but now he uses *apostrophe*, signifying that his human audience has failed him, much as Philoctetes is failed by Neoptolemus and the chorus at *Philoctetes* 1005-1162, and turns to apostrophe. In 372-6, Ajax re-lives his thwarted revenge, ruminating on his humiliation, re-playing it: these ruminations and selective recall are common to those contemplating suicide, as discussed earlier. This is the chorus' response:

> τί δῆτ᾽ ἂν ἀλγοίης ἐπ᾽ ἐξειργασμένοις;
> οὐ γὰρ γένοιτ᾽ ἂν ταῦθ᾽ ὅπως οὐχ ὧδ᾽ ἔχειν.(377-8)
>
> Why should you grieve over what is accomplished? It is impossible that things should be other than they are.

This is typical of attempts to divert the suicidal mind: it's over, stop grieving, move on, ignoring that a process of grieving is what is required at this time. It is also an attempt to

[196] Ibid. 94.

get Ajax to suppress his thoughts, a process that intensifies the emotionality and suicidal ideation, as opposed to acceptance of the emotions expressed and empathizing with the situation to create solidarity and lessen isolation of the distressed individual.

Ajax continues singing as if he had not heard them, this time apostrophizing Odysseus, tormenting himself by imagining the laughter of his greatest enemy who had deprived him of the arms (379-82) and wishes to witness Odysseus' suffering (384-5). This is almost a prompt to the audience to recall the opening scene: Ajax gloating, the god mocking, Odysseus empathizing. Ajax next calls on Zeus: if only he could kill Odysseus and the Atreidai before killing himself (388-91)—this is a counterfactual "if only" that may trigger the idea of the curse; we will come back to this in discussing Ajax's curse in his final speech. Tecmessa interjects here that her death would follow his, but there is no evidence that Ajax has heard or even assimilated her words, engrossed as he is in his own world of pain and humiliation.

A pinnacle of despair is reached in the next pair of *strophe* and *antistrophes*, expressed in brilliant poetry:

> ἰὼ
> σκότος, ἐμὸν φάος,
> ἔρεβος ὦ φαεννότατον, ὡς ἐμοί,
> ἕλεσθ' ἕλεσθέ μ' οἰκήτορα,
> ἕλεσθέ μ': οὔτε γὰρ θεῶν γένος οὔθ' ἁμερίων
> ἔτ' ἄξιος βλέπειν τιν' εἰς ὄνασιν ἀνθρώπων.(394-400)
>
> Ah, darkness that is my light, gloom that is most bright for me, take me, take me to dwell in you! For I am no longer worthy to look upon the race of gods nor upon that of mortal men to any profit.

In these magnificent impassioned lines, Ajax plays on polarities of dark and light, and inverts them: the dark underworld will be the light of release from life and humiliation.

He belongs in the dark, in Erebus, and not on earth. Here are echoes of Athena's darkening of his sight in the prologue and of Ajax's prayer to Zeus to die fighting in the light ("ἐν δὲ φάει καὶ ὄλεσσον, ἐπεί νύ τοι εὔαδεν οὕτως." *Il.* XVII.647).[197]

Exiled from both gods and men, nothing can profit Ajax and neither can help him. He continues: where could he flee, where make a stand, when his actions have made his death at the hands of the army likely? (403-09) His comrades are now his enemies, he has lost the protection afforded by the military *ethos* that bonds warriors together and often reduces the risk of self-harm. We also saw that loss of those bonds increases the risk of suicide, especially being demoted or dismissed, and that those who strive to excel the most, experience greater feelings of failure. Ajax, the pre-eminent warrior after Achilles, feels his abandonment by the Greeks keenly in the votes that gave the arms to Odysseus.

Tecmessa's intervention at lines 410-11 goes completely unheeded; she laments that Ajax had spoken words he would never have spoken though we are not clear which words she means; possibly she means the entirety of his song. Ajax's *antistrophe* (412-27) is another passionate cry, this time addressing the Trojan land and sea, bidding them farewell, ending with his statement that they will never see him again:

ἰὼ
πόροι ἁλίρροθοι
πάραλά τ᾽ ἄντρα καὶ νέμος ἐπάκτιον,
πολὺν πολύν με δαρόν τε δὴ
κατείχετ᾽ ἀμφὶ Τροίαν χρόνον: ἀλλ᾽ οὐκέτι μ᾽, οὐκ
ἔτ᾽ ἀμπνοὰς ἔχοντα: τοῦτό τις φρονῶν ἴστω.
ὦ Σκαμάνδριοι
γείτονες ῥοαί,
εὔφρονες Ἀργείοις,
οὐκέτ᾽ ἄνδρα μὴ
τόνδ᾽ ἴδητ᾽, ἔπος
ἐξερῶ μέγ᾽, οἷον οὔτινα

[197] See H. Musurillo 1967: 7-24.

Τροία στρατοῦ δέρχθη χθονὸς μολόντ᾽ ἀπὸ
Ἑλλανίδος: τανῦν δ᾽ ἄτιμος
ὧδε πρόκειμαι.

Hail, surging straits of the sea, caves by the shore, and pastures of the coast! Long, long has been the time that you have detained me about Troy; but no more, no more shall I draw breath! Let any man who understands know that! O streams of Scamander near by, inimical to the Argives, no longer shall you look upon a man—I shall utter a mighty boast!—such as no other of the army that Troy has seen come from the land of Hellas! But now I lie here thus, deprived of honour.

The apostrophe articulates a telescopic look that begins at a far point then zooms in close: starting at the horizon, it moves to the caves by the shore, then the coastal inlands and finally to the nearby Scamander and centres on his prostate body. He ends with a proud boast – that the land of Troy did not see his equal in the army from the land of Greece, yet now he lies dishonored. Commentators have pointed out that this is demonstrably false: Ajax was always the second-best of the Achaeans, after Achilles. But these are words from a man *in extremis* and an example of faulty memory, of the selective recall that the suicidal crisis engenders; it exaggerates his failure and degradation, by re-visioning his fall from the greatest heights. The chorus expresses its frustration in lines 428-9:

οὔτοι σ᾽ ἀπείργειν οὐδ᾽ ὅπως ἐῶ λέγειν
ἔχω, κακοῖς τοιοῖσδε συμπεπτωκότα.
I cannot restrain you, and I do not know how to let you speak, when you have encountered such woes as these.

They do not know how to restrain him or how to let him to speak. These are the only two options as they see it: Ajax is to be *silenced* above all.

Reading the scholarship on the above passages (one can hardly call them interchanges, given the extreme one-sidedness of the responses) I am struck at how often the "failure of communication"[198] is made the fault of Ajax. As quoted above, Goldhill says that Ajax breaks contact. Worman says that "Ajax continues to speak in a manner that is at odds with his interlocutors."[199] Ringer concludes that "Throughout the tragedy, Ajax remains alienated from the characters surrounding him."[200] Nooter calls the exchange a *kommos*, but "his lamentation [is] less effective as a communal exchange of grief than as a lyrical soliloquy. This is partly due to the chorus' (and Tecmessa's) being *unwilling to fully enter* Ajax's lyrical mode [my italics]. Their spoken attempts to *soothe* him are met by his repeated cries and apostrophic songs. Sophocles shows Ajax becoming more isolated through sung lament, rather than using lamentation to connect to the chorus (who, at a generic level at least, could be expected to sing with and to the protagonist)."[201] The sung lament indeed shows Ajax becoming isolated, but the chorus and Tecmessa fail to enter at all into Ajax's lyrical mode, and fail to "soothe", given they are attempting to silence him rather than reflect or join in the exchange, in contrast to the usual manner of the *kommos*, as portrayed in Sophocles' *Electra* or Aeschylus' *Persians*. Nooter goes on: Ajax "foils the expectations of traditional lament, inasmuch as lamentation often helps to reinstate the lamenter within his society. He aims for the ether and the gods. As his addresses turn to more distant apostrophes, Ajax's lament ceases to be a communal *kommos*, for he is implicitly rejecting these human interlocutors in favour of loftier *yous*."[202] And further: "Ajax's rejection of contact with others is followed by an inward turn."[203]

[198] Gardiner 1987: 87.
[199] Worman 2001: 234.
[200] Ringer 1998: 37.
[201] Nooter 2012: 39.
[202] Ibid. 39-40. Nooter uses "yous" for apostrophes.
[203] Ibid. 40.

I argue that there was never a *kommos* to begin with: the chorus and Tecmessa never sing *with* Ajax. They fail to meet him on an emotional level and reject at every turn his attempted communication with them. Both the chorus and Tecmessa speak *at* him, and not *with* him. Their failure to connect with Ajax in his loss, rage, humiliation and grief prompts the misunderstood and profoundly isolated hero to turn both outward in apostrophes to the gods and the landscape, and inward to consider his predicament and invoke death as deliverance.[204] Henceforth, and for the rest of the play, Ajax speaks in iambics. From 430 to 480 he speaks, not sings, of his situation. All the rationalizations that appear in these fifty lines of spoken iambics are but worked out explanations already emotionally expressed in the earlier sung verses, the last that Ajax sings in the play. The emotional truth has been reached: there is no way out, the final end is decided. Or is it?

3.2.4 Further Delineating the Suicidal Mind

Perhaps cognizant that his passionate cries have shocked his audience, Ajax now embarks on a spoken summation of his situation. As Finglass points out: "The emotional level is as intense as in the song, but with the emphasis now on intellectual, analytical emotion…"[205]

Ajax begins with his name, so expressive of his destiny (430-3): a selective autobiographical recollection, now pregnant with new meaning. Next, he compares his achievements with those of his father, Telamon, who had achieved renown in Troy. Ajax has in this war performed deeds as mighty as his father but yet is being destroyed with dishonor, being denied the arms of Achilles (437-40). His father's renown is the standard he must achieve—imposing on himself that socially-prescribed perfectionism that cannot bear failure. The cause is the arms, which takes him to state a counter-factual, an "if-only"

[204] Burton comes closest when he says that the chorus "to a large extent find him incomprehensible, a burden to be borne rather than understood." 1980: 7.
[205] Finglass 2011: 264.

that is jarring in its irrationality and yet common among the thought-processes of suicides, who yearn for the impossible: if Achilles were alive, he would award the arms to Ajax (441-4). Surely, a living hero would not have bestowed his arms on anyone? By stating that Achilles himself would have awarded the arms to him, Ajax is declaring his own supremacy and staking his right to his own glory.[206] This leads naturally to recollection of his disgrace and humiliation and the cause as he perceives it: the deception of the Atreidai who awarded the arms to Odysseus (445-6) and then the failure of his revenge owing to the intervention of Athena (447-53). This produces the result that they have escaped and are now laughing at him (454-5), even though he has been baulked by a god (455-6). Ajax is here ruminating on and re-living his humiliation, something common to the suicidal mind. But he is also expressing the sense of a failed struggle accompanying the subjective experience of defeat, engendering that despair that goes beyond hopelessness into a belief of there being no likelihood of rescue, whether by self or other, which we see expressed in his next lines, after he asks, as the tragic hero does "What must I do?"

> καὶ νῦν τί χρὴ δρᾶν; ὅστις ἐμφανῶς θεοῖς
> ἐχθαίρομαι, μισεῖ δέ μ᾽ Ἑλλήνων στρατός,
> ἔχθει δὲ Τροία πᾶσα καὶ πεδία τάδε.(457-9)
>
> And now what must I do, I who patently am hated by the gods, and loathed by the army of the Greeks, and hated, too, by Troy and by these plains?

The formulation of his situation - a man hated by the gods and all men, Greeks and Trojans, and even by the Trojan land – expresses the quintessential sense of entrapment, with enemies on every side, and the very ground beneath him hostile. Left unspoken is

[206] This is a judgment shared by Odysseus at the end of the play, at lines 1340-1.

his grief at his absent brother and at his helpless friends, standing by mute and uncomprehending of his misery and grief.

Yet even here there are options, which he considers and proceeds to reject. Should he leave the Atreidai alone (they are the constant enemies he harps on), and return home across the Aegean sea (460-1)? But a return home is impossible:

> καὶ ποῖον ὄμμα πατρὶ δηλώσω φανεὶς
> Τελαμῶνι; πῶς με τλήσεταί ποτ᾽ εἰσιδεῖν
> γυμνὸν φανέντα τῶν ἀριστείων ἄτερ,
> ᾧν αὐτὸς ἔσχε στέφανον εὐκλείας μέγαν;
> οὐκ ἔστι τοὔργον τλητόν. (462-6)
>
> And what kind of face shall I show to my father Telamon when I appear? How ever shall he bring himself to look at me when I appear empty-handed, without the prize of victory, when he himself won a great crown of fame? The thing is not to be endured!

As Finglass says, "Neither son nor father would be able to look the other in the eye, the one for shame, the other for contempt."[207] This socially sanctioned perfectionism characteristic of a shame culture is one that exerts huge pressure on Ajax to live up to these enormous expectations. What is more, he has internalized those values, he holds them preeminent above all, and cannot violate them without ceasing to be the man he is. As Bernard Williams puts it: "Not only is his language full of the most basic images of shame, of sight and nudity, but it expresses directly a reciprocal relation between what he and his father could not bear…Ajax is identified with the standards of excellence represented by his father's honours."[208]

[207] Finglass 2011: 272.
[208] Williams 1993: 85.

Should he take on the Trojans in single combat and die in some noble action? The language here (466-8) carries an echo of Hector at *Iliad* XXII.304-5. But such action would give pleasure to his enemies the Atreidai so some other enterprise has to be embarked upon in order to prove to his father that he is no coward (470-2). That he is thinking of suicide is clear from the next lines:

> αἰσχρὸν γὰρ ἄνδρα τοῦ μακροῦ χρῄζειν βίου,
> κακοῖσιν ὅστις μηδὲν ἐξαλλάσσεται.(473-4)
> τί γὰρ παρ᾽ ἦμαρ ἡμέρα τέρπειν ἔχει
> προσθεῖσα κἀναθεῖσα τοῦ γε κατθανεῖν;(475-6)
> When a man has no relief from troubles, it is shameful for him to desire long life. What pleasure comes from day following day, bringing us near to and taking us back from death?

Ajax expects no variation in his misfortunes, sees no end to his woes: the feelings of defeat and entrapment are projected into the future, into a succession of empty days.

> ἀλλ᾽ ἢ καλῶς ζῆν ἢ καλῶς τεθνηκέναι
> τὸν εὐγενῆ χρή. πάντ᾽ ἀκήκοας λόγον.(479-80)
> The noble man must live with honour or be honourably dead; you have heard all I have to say.

This last line appears conclusive; yet we shall see that Sophocles does not leave it there.

In the above passages, Ajax's isolation is clear: he expresses it himself repeatedly, through his haunting use of *monos,* alone, in different contexts. No one has helped him up to this point, except to attempt to get him to stop singing, stop talking about death. After hearing his measured, spoken words, will his interlocutors now make a difference?

3.2.5 Final Preparations?

The chorus acknowledges that he speaks from the heart, they urge him to give up the thoughts of suicide and surrender to the judgment of his friends (481-4), but they provide no alternatives to the grim reality Ajax has spelt out. They fail, once again, to empathize with the depth of his pain and loss. Tecmessa attempts persuasion using a number of arguments, during which Ajax remains silent, although we realise later that he has heard her as he subsequently addresses some, though not all, of the concerns she raises. First, she draws attention to her own example and counsels resignation to compulsion, and supplicates his goodwill towards her (485-93). She next suggests that she will be enslaved by the Argives after Ajax's death, and this will contribute to his shame (494-505); these lines appear modelled on the encounter between Hector and Andromache at *Iliad* VI.407-93. Thirdly, she appeals to him to render care to his aged mother and father and his son, reminding him of his duties to his *philoi* (506-13). Lastly she appeals to the bonds of reciprocity that bind them and suggests that his concept of nobility should be wider than concern for his own individual name (514-24).

Submission to compulsion was never going to appeal to Ajax: the Homeric hero never survives to submit to slavery but dies in battle. Her fate is the fate of women and children, of slaves. Tecmessa's personal appeal is heartfelt and touching, and the parallels with Hector and Andromache cast Ajax into the more negative light, showing in this scene at least none of the empathetic insight of Hector. But the *similarities* between Ajax and Hector have not received the same attention. Hector rejects Andromache's appeal on the grounds of honour; Ajax does the same, only he has expressed his reasons *before* Tecmessa's appeal and not in response to her, which makes his silence appear cruel. Hector says he is unable to act differently because honour compels him to fight, even though he knows he will die and Troy will fall; Ajax is also making an argument from honour, except that this involves his self-slaughter. Only later in the "deception" speech

does Ajax admit that Tecmessa's appeal had touched him and he makes provision for her and his son.

As discussed earlier, suicide arises from the confluence of an unmet need to belong (i.e. thwarted belongingness) and an unmet need to contribute to the welfare of others (i.e. perceived burdensomeness). Ajax no longer belongs to his class of warriors, or the wider brotherhood of soldiers making up the Greek army; and having disgraced his family and made it impossible to face his father, he perceives his life and presence as a worse burden on the living than his death, a death that would relieve them and restore some of his lost honour. Neither the chorus nor Tecmessa suggests how the enmity of the Greeks is to be countered by a living Ajax: the threat of punishment by the army and stoning to death is a real possibility. Ajax may have considered that his suicide would act to end the enmity of the Greeks, and save his family from the worst outcomes, we see him suggesting this at 560-1. And in the suicide's aftermath, the honours due to the body are contested and violence to the dead man proposed, but no suggestion of violence against Tecmessa and Eurysaces is made.

The *stichomythia* between Ajax and Tecmessa, where he demands that Eurysaces be brought to him, consists of a series of impatient questions on his son's whereabouts and demands for explanations of the delay in bringing him in. Told that Tecmessa had removed him for fear, Ajax approves of her initiative, remarking (534) ironically that killing his child would have suited his destiny; wretched as he was, hated by gods and men, the crowning disaster would have been massacring his own child. Ajax bids the child to be lifted into his arms, confident that he will not flinch at the sight of the blood, if he is truly his son (545-7) and this will be his induction into warrior violence:

> ἀλλ᾽ αὐτίκ᾽ ὠμοῖς αὐτὸν ἐν νόμοις πατρὸς
> δεῖ πωλοδαμνεῖν κἀξομοιοῦσθαι φύσιν.(548-9)

> You must begin now to break him in by his father's harsh rules and make his nature like mine.

Here it is appropriate to discuss the habituation to violence that makes suicide a suitable solution to an intractable problem for a warrior. We have seen that suffering loneliness and hopelessness, perceiving oneself a burden, and without a meaningful future, do not by themselves translate into active self-injuring behaviour. Such behaviour requires a degree of fearlessness and insensitivity to pain, often brought about by risk-taking or a history of abuse or similar experience. In particular, military personnel display just such habituation to violence through combat exposure ending up with an increased tolerance for violence and an acquired capability for death. This would apply to Ajax and indeed to the Athenian citizens in the audience.[209] The Homeric and fifth century battlefields were replete with blood and violence, and such battlefields are the milieu of Ajax's triumphs, the source of his fame. Turning that violence inward is not something to be feared. That capability for violence, the warrior nature, is also a source of pride, to be celebrated and inculcated in one's male offspring, in contrast to our more pacific times. Ajax expresses the wish that his son would be like him in all respects but more fortunate: 550-1; he envies the sweet innocence of the child but enjoins Eurysaces when he grows up, to treat his father's enemies as his own. Until then he would be a source of joy to his mother: 558-9, the son to take the place of the father. Ajax is also confident that his son will be safe from violence by the Greeks 560-1 (I interpret this as Ajax expecting his suicide to end the hostility of the Greek army) and under the protection of Teucer. These words would also have echoed for the Athenian audience as Eurysaces was worshipped at an altar near the Athenian agora.[210]

[209] Pritchard 2005.
[210] Farnell 1921: 308.

Ajax designates Teucer to be Eurysaces' guardian and to take him home to Ajax's parents: the charge is laid on the chorus to convey this information to Teucer, implying that Ajax will not wait for his brother to return: 565-70. The grandson will look after his grandparents, which is a rejoinder to Tecmessa's reproach that Ajax is leaving his parents uncared for. Ajax's next thought is for his arms, which are not to be awarded to any one of the Greeks: Ajax will leave nothing to his enemies. The shield is left to Eurysaces, the remaining armour is to be buried with Ajax: 572-77. Nothing is said of his sword here: the audience will have known it to be the suicide weapon, from other literary sources and the visual arts.[211]

The closing *stichomythia* at 583-95 is similar to two passages in *OC* 1437-46 and *Hipp*. 722-4. As Finglass points out, if this was already an established pattern, then the audience would infer that the suicide was imminent and would take place offstage.[212] The chorus and Tecmessa interrogate him anxiously: Tecmessa pleads twice in the name of her son and by the gods (587-8, 594) and Ajax responds that he owes no more service to the gods (589-90), a remark that appears hubristic but can also be interpreted to mean that death was about to release him from service. He is impatient for the interrogation to stop, while they are desperate for him to speak words of comfort that they want to hear, a common theme in the suicidal crisis. Ajax rejects them and tells Tecmessa in 595 that she is foolish if she thinks she can educate his character. His intent is firm, he has decided on death and by his nature, he is unable to change.

The chorus lament after Ajax leaves, but their lamentation is for themselves. In the first *strophe* they sing of Salamis and implicitly how they long for it as they rot away in Troy with death imminent. In the *antistrophe* they sing of Ajax and his madness, how he is now a grief to his friends, implying that he is the cause of their imminent demise. In the second *strophe* they revert to the theme of home from the first *strophe*, singing now

[211] See especially Blake Tyrrell 1985.
[212] Finglass 2011: 309.

of the grief of Ajax's mother; most likely they mimic the sounds and movements of lamentation, thus lamenting themselves. Ajax's father figures in the *antistrophe* even as the chorus suggests that death is preferable to madness and that Ajax is a stranger to himself. Here too we have echoes from the *Iliad*, where parents and children are constant themes: Hector and Priam, Achilles and Peleus.

3.2.6 The 'Deception Speech'

The expectation has been set up for the suicide, so Ajax's re-entrance and next speech are a dramatic coup: Sophocles is pushing contingency to the maximum, setting up even this iconic suicide for the "will he or won't he?" question. Has Ajax truly changed his mind? If so, why? How convincing are his reasons? The audience, like any audience, is likely to have differing views of the speech and its aftermath. Some may have rejoiced with the chorus at his perceived change of mind. Others would have doubted the words spoken. All would have wondered: will Sophocles allow Ajax to live? In a study involving modern participants who were given the speech to read and asked if the speaker was deceiving his hearers or truly decided against death,[213] the majority concluded that the speech is deceiving in intent; and this response appeared driven partly or wholly by knowledge of the iconic status of the suicide of Ajax. In the published paper, the fact that sixty-five percent of respondents thought the speech was deceptive surprised the authors: "We were astonished to note that what this famously ambiguous speech appears to have produced is a comprehensively disambiguating response."[214] While agreeing that this exercise only imperfectly replicated the position of the ancient audience at the first performance, the authors say, "Our questionnaire firmly closed the door" to the possibility of Sophocles teasing that audience with the "remote, unsettling possibility of a radical deviation from

[213] Felix Budelmann 'Ambiguity and Audience Response' Paper presented at the SPHS Panel on 'Tragic Ambiguity' on 19th February 2014 and published in 2016.
[214] Budelmann et al. 2016: 107.

the normal account."[215] Given that the suicide was iconic also for the ancients, it is likely that more spectators would have doubted the speech than accepted it uncritically as the chorus do. But then the chorus is in the theatrical space where the action is proceeding *now*, with no fore-knowledge of the aftermath that makes Ajax the iconic suicide. The moment of *now* has possibilities and contingencies that are not closed off. They remain open and dynamic, staging a moment capable of being shared by the audience as they live that *now*.[216] In addition, it bears keeping in mind that what comes *after*, that is, the messenger and the prophecy of Calchas, open further possibilities of saving Ajax, and could have caused spectators' minds to waver.

Heath and Okell, in a paper titled 'Sophocles' Ajax: Expect the Unexpected',[217] in the course of a meticulous study of the entrances and exits in the play, conclude that these would have continuously raised and dashed expectations against the traditional or pre-Sophoclean treatments of the myth. I suggest that the fifty lines of the "deception speech" raise, at the very least, the possibility of a different outcome, in keeping with the tragedians' constant re-working of the myth. Sophocles is pushing contingency to its very limits in that first performance, increasing the pathos. And for those in the audience who did not believe Ajax had changed his mind, that belief did not necessarily lessen the pathos: Stanford points out that "when one hears that a disaster is inevitable and imminent the pity and fear increase … Foreknowledge extends the range of pathos backwards, giving it double power."[218] This surely applies to all subsequent viewings of tragedies: we are no less moved by a performance of *Lear* or *Macbeth* by knowing the ending.

The question of deceit has often been posed as one of character: does Ajax set out to deceive or is he misunderstood? The critics who refuse to believe that Ajax is capable

[215] Ibid. 108.
[216] On the temporal orientation towards the 'now' and 'imminent future' of live drama and to the question 'What will happen *next*', even in plays set in the past, see Hall 2010: 24-5 with references.
[217] Heath and Okell 2007.
[218] Stanford 1980: 135.

of deceit declare that the Homeric Ajax is incapable of deceit or he would not be Ajax. But *this* Ajax has already been guilty of deceit by leaving his tent at dead of night, stealthily, to commit violence against the leaders of the army, knowing that he could not kill them openly; there is no evidence that this act of premeditated murder is part of the madness, only mistaking cattle for men is the madness sent by Athena. Sophocles' Ajax then is no Homeric Ajax, he is post-Homer, for Homer did not deal with the aftermath of the death of Achilles. This is an Ajax driven by rage at dishonour, intent on revenge that would wipe out the dishonour.

We learnt in the contemporary research into suicide that communication often occurs in the early stages but dries up closer to the time set for the act, often to prevent obstruction of purpose and allow the suicide to proceed. In that light, the key purpose of the speech appears in 654-60, where Ajax declares his purpose to proceed to the shore, sword in hand, in order to clean himself and bury the sword that was the gift of the enemy. In any modern context, withdrawal to an isolated place, armed with the means, after previous declarations of intent, would be sure evidence of intent to suicide. Indeed, the sword alone would be a dead giveaway. But a close analysis of the speech also reveals other patterns that resemble the contemporary research into the suicidal mind.

The first thing to note is that in this scene Ajax is as isolated as ever: he enters, speaks and leaves; no one else speaks, since Ajax is apparently giving way to the appeals of Tecmessa and the chorus. The effect of this solitary entrance, speech and exit is to "isolate the protagonist".[219] Next, the speech itself, at the very outset, tells Tecmessa and the chorus *what they have been wanting to hear all along* through their denials and pleas:

> ἅπανθ' ὁ μακρὸς κἀναρίθμητος χρόνος
> φύει τ' ἄδηλα καὶ φανέντα κρύπτεται:
> κοὐκ ἔστ' ἄελπτον οὐδέν, ἀλλ' ἀλίσκεται

[219] Finglass 2011: 328.

χὠ δεινὸς ὅρκος χαὶ περισκελεῖς φρένες. (648-9)

All things long and countless time brings to birth in darkness and covers after they have been revealed! Nothing is beyond expectation; the dread oath and the unflinching purpose can be overcome.

He too has been changed moved by pity in response to Tecmessa's appeals. But he needs to cleanse himself, to escape the anger of Athena, and bury the ill-omened sword, "most hated of all weapons". Since receiving it from Hector, the deadliest of his enemies, never had he had any good thing from the Argives. His future conduct will also change:

τοιγὰρ τὸ λοιπὸν εἰσόμεσθα μὲν θεοῖς
εἴκειν, μαθησόμεσθα δ᾽ Ἀτρείδας σέβειν.
ἄρχοντές εἰσιν, ὥσθ᾽ ὑπεικτέον. τί μήν;
καὶ γὰρ τὰ δεινὰ καὶ τὰ καρτερώτατα
τιμαῖς ὑπείκει: τοῦτο μὲν νιφοστιβεῖς
χειμῶνες ἐκχωροῦσιν εὐκάρπῳ θέρει:
ἐξίσταται δὲ νυκτὸς αἰανὴς κύκλος
τῇ λευκοπώλῳ φέγγος ἡμέρᾳ φλέγειν:
δεινῶν τ᾽ ἄημα πνευμάτων ἐκοίμισε
στένοντα πόντον: ἐν δ᾽ ὁ παγκρατὴς ὕπνος
λύει πεδήσας, οὐδ᾽ ἀεὶ λαβὼν ἔχει. (666-676)

Therefore for the future we shall learn to yield to the gods, and we shall learn to reverence the sons of Atreus. They are commanders, so that we must bow to them, how else? Why, the most formidable and the most powerful of things bow to office; winter's snowy storms make way before summer with its fruits, and night's dread circle moves aside for day drawn by white horses to make her lights blaze; and the blast of fearful winds lulls to rest the groaning sea, and all-powerful Sleep releases those whom he has bound, nor does he hold his prisoners forever.

Ajax's language here shows evidence of "constriction" and pronounced dichotomous thinking with polarities juxtaposed and phenomena described in superlatives—psychological symptoms identified by suicidological studies, as we have seen above. He has to revere and bow to the commanders because they are all-powerful, and yield to the gods in the manner in which the most extreme natural phenomena yield in turn to the next. Only extreme qualities are envisioned: no moderate manifestations moderate this all-or-nothing thinking. Ajax draws an explicit comparison: in the same way, the inflexible Ajax, who had exited the previous scene declaring that he would not be educated further (594-5), now declares that he too will learn prudence and wisdom (677-8), because he says he has now learned the bitter lesson that friends may become enemies and enemies friends (678-82) concluding with its sorrowful declaration:

> τοῖς πολλοῖσι γὰρ
> βροτῶν ἄπιστός ἐσθ᾽ ἑταιρείας λιμήν.(682-3)
> for most mortals the harbour of friendship cannot be trusted.

Repeating his earlier commands (687-9) with its hints of finality, he ends:

> ἐγὼ γὰρ εἶμ᾽ ἐκεῖσ᾽ ὅποι πορευτέον: (690)
>
> for I must go the place I have to go to

He has a place to go to and a road to travel, he says, and exits via the road to the shore. Visualization is going on here, but it is the road to death: images of travel and places often appear in suicide notes, as we have seen. Referring to burying the sword deep in the earth where only Hades would find it, is a flash-forward to his suicide. Such images of place and act are simultaneously distressing and comforting to the suicidal mind.

The poetry of the speech has often been commented upon. Nooter remarks that this has been "long considered his most lyrically marked [speech] despite the fact that it

is in iambic trimeter rather than lyrics."[220] But once again, the poetic quality of Ajax's speeches echo those of Achilles in the *Iliad*. Achilles' voice is elevated above those of his comrades, and frequently seems to acquire a cosmic or near-metaphysical dimension, to be the voice of the poet himself: he uses elaborate similes, he is shown playing the lyre and singing of the deeds of man. Often the poet sounds like Achilles, especially when he apostrophizes Patroclus in Book XVI.[221] Nooter argues that this elevation of poetic voice transforms Ajax into a poet and an almost prophet-like persona, but the tragic genre was itself highly poetic and lyric. The change in Ajax's voice is both mediated by his supreme crisis, and an echoing of Achilles.

Our earlier discussion of suicide notes concluded that, as expressions of constricted thought processes from minds overwhelmed by psychological pain and suffering, these notes are often banal, and generally fail to express ambivalence. Shneidman suggests that we look to literature for depictions of the ambivalent mind, moving constantly between twin poles of life and death. In that respect, I interpret Ajax's final speech at 815-65 as equivalent to a suicide note, and the deception speech as an outstanding depiction of ambivalence. The desire to live is here expressed: Ajax has been moved by Tecmessa's appeal and the plight of his son. But to choose to live entails in his mind only extreme acts: submission to the Atreidai and placating the gods. Ajax can only see those options in extreme terms: *yielding* to the gods, that is, surrendering his self-sufficiency in all things, and then *doing reverence* to the Atreidai, that is, instead of submitting to their authority, he is suing for life from his enemies. Both options are cast in terms of utter defeat and humiliation and therefore polarized into the worst case. But has Ajax assimilated the possibility of just such reversals, as his language suggests? Sophocles leaves his audience uncertain as to whether his protagonist will adapt himself to these truths, of a world in which friends may transform into enemies *and back again*.

[220] Nooter 2012: 41.
[221] XVI.580-5, 692-4,754, 786-9, 812-3, 843.

The prologue showed us an enemy, Odysseus, pitying his rival, while remaining an enemy. A further possibility is raised in the very next scene: are the gods relenting?

3.2.7 Messenger Misery

Ajax departs, sword in hand, and the relieved chorus erupt in joy, calling on the gods in song and dance: 693-718. They have willingly accepted the surface meanings of his speech and celebrate the approaching reconciliation of Ajax with the commanders and his renewed reverence for the gods; they do not interrogate the depths of the crisis or the ominous changes in his character because they both need and want to believe that he has changed, as do the friends, family and even psychiatric staff dealing with the suicidal. But their joy is short-lived. A messenger arrives: the audience may expect to be told about the suicide, though he arrives from the direction of the camp, not the shore, where Ajax has gone. At first the news is positive: the messenger reports that Teucer has returned. The speech takes a darker turn when he relates that Teucer has been assailed as a traitor, almost to the point of violence. But his message is for Ajax; he wishes to convey the news directly to Ajax. (719-34). The news that Ajax has left the camp evokes dismay from the messenger, and a repeated "Too late!" With foreboding he says that Calchas had taken Teucer aside to advise him to keep Ajax indoors for this one day in order to preserve his life (748-55) as Athena's anger will pursue him for this day alone (756-7). This enmity was caused by Ajax's offence in rejecting his father's advice to win always with the gods' help and his refusal of Athena's aid in battle, both egregious acts of contempt towards the gods. However, the worst can still be averted if Ajax is kept alive for this one day: 778-9.

I wish to examine three elements of this speech. First, Ajax is not entirely without support in the camp: the older men who intervene to stop the violence (731-2) and Calchas' advice to Teucer (749-52). Second, Calchas is emphatic: Ajax must be kept

indoors if Teucer is ever to see him alive. This insistence does not square with the scholars who question the need for the deception speech: Ajax could have killed himself at any time without fear of being stopped, hence he has no need to ensure that he departs alone. Yet the insistence of the messenger, the command of Calchas and the urgent message of Teucer all assume that Ajax can be restrained within his tent with the combined resolve of his *philoi*. To believe otherwise is to deprive this part of the play of probability and force, and the resulting search for Ajax of any dramatic meaning: we have to believe that Ajax can be stopped from killing himself.

Third, the emphasis on keeping Ajax alive for one day. We have seen that the suicidal crisis is often transient, of limited duration, hence the need to intervene, to block the exit, remove the means, and accompany or keep safe the person during the worst of the crisis. This seems to be the thought at work here, even though of course, the messenger's speech also serves several dramatic purposes: creating tension within the chorus and Tecmessa, showing them the fragility of their hopes, and galvanizing them to search for Ajax. The speech leads to the inexorable vision of the impending suicide and harks back to Athena's mention at 131-2 of one day overthrowing men's plans and raising them again. Above all, the possibility of reprieve illustrates an ambivalent relationship between Athena and Ajax, as imagined by Sophocles.

Is there any other play in which a god relents her anger and offers a truce to her victim? Oedipus at the end of his life has earned a kind of redemption that makes him holy. Philoctetes is assured of a cure at the end of his eponymous play, but we are not even told which god he had offended whose wrath had resulted in his wound. The possibility of the goddess' relenting pushes contingency to its limit: if even the gods relent, Ajax need not die. Athena does not want Ajax dead: he can be saved, he can live, if time is allowed to play its part. The possibility of reversal that Ajax had spoken of so eloquently in his deception speech is here dramatized with maximum force: even the

enmity of the gods, the most powerful of beings, is not eternal. The force of this should not be subsumed in the wider argument that the gods relent when men placate them; at this point Ajax has done nothing to appease or placate Athena; he has however earlier announced his intention to do so. A natural interpretation then is Ajax has already reverenced the goddess and she has relented. However that does not square with her commandment that he be kept indoors for that one day during which her rage still drives him. The inference is that with the end of the day and her anger, he will be saved. Is it a stretch to say that Calchas is the instrument of the goddess who attempts to prevent the suicide? This goes some way surely to ameliorate the accusation of cruelty usually made against Athena.

In support of this, I suggest that Sophocles is relying on the echoes of the one instance of a god helping the Aiantes when Poseidon disguises himself as Calchas in *Iliad* book XIII:

> ἀλλὰ Ποσειδάων γαιήοχος ἐννοσίγαιος
> Ἀργείους ὤτρυνε, βαθείης ἐξ ἁλὸς ἐλθών,
> εἰσάμενος Κάλχαντι δέμας καὶ ἀτειρέα φωνήν·
> Αἴαντε πρώτω προσέφη, μεμαῶτε καὶ αὐτώ· 44-7
> But Poseidon, the enfolder and shaker of earth, urged on the Argives, when he had come out from the deep sea, in the likeness of Calchas, in form and untiring voice. To the two Aiantes he spoke first, themselves very eager.

Poseidon exhorts them to defend the ships, where the Trojans have the greatest chance of breaking through and strikes them with his staff filling them with strength (59-60). It is the lesser Ajax who is *first* to recognise the god at 68-75, suggesting that Ajax does also recognize Poseidon in the form of Calchas when he responds:

> Τὸν δ᾽ ἀπαμειβόμενος προσέφη Τελαμώνιος Αἴας·

"οὕτω νῦν καὶ ἐμοὶ περὶ δούρατι χεῖρες ἄαπτοι
μαιμῶσιν, καί μοι μένος ὥρορε, νέρθε δὲ ποσσὶν
ἔσσυμαι ἀμφοτέροισι· μενοινώω δὲ καὶ οἷος
Ἕκτορι Πριαμίδῃ ἄμοτον μεμαῶτι μάχεσθαι." 76-80

In answer spoke to him Telamonian Aias: "So too my invincible hands are eager now to grasp the spear, and my might is roused, and my feet are swift beneath me; and I am eager to meet even in single fight Hector, Priam's son, who rages incessantly."

To return to the play, in the usual manner of a messenger, the message is spoken twice, first to the chorus, then repeated to Tecmessa. This serves to ratchet up the tension and increase the urgency: this suicide is not inevitable, Ajax's *philoi* are tasked by the goddess through Calchas to save Ajax. Will they come too late, much like Creon in *Antigone*? This part ends with Tecmessa and the chorus departing in desperate search of Ajax, leaving the stage bare for the next revelation.

3.2.8 On-stage suicide

Given that Sophocles has raised obstacle after obstacle, delay after delay, dramatized uncertainty regarding Ajax's intent and the possibility of his being saved by having the chorus leave the stage in pursuit of the protagonist, I argue that Sophocles has left himself little choice but to do the unprecedented: bring Ajax on stage and answer the question beyond doubt.

Ajax appears alone and once again this accentuates his sense of isolation.[222] In the ensuing speech, there is no rehearsal of reasons, no ambivalence. The ambivalence so evident in the deception speech has passed, to be replaced with grim intent. Indeed it is possible to regard this last speech as the suicide note: no longer expressing ambivalence,

[222] Finglass 2011: 375.

but making last farewells and expressing final wishes. And issuing a curse as a final act of retribution against his enemies.

This scene is replete with flash-forward imagery discussed earlier: the suicidal mind focuses on, obsesses about, and above all *visualizes*, the details of the act and its aftermath, as well as imagining the impact on survivors. Ajax opens with his description of how he has sharpened the sword and securely planted it so it would provide a speedy death: 815-23, ending with "Thus I am well prepared." The succeeding image in his mind must be one of visualizing the act of impaling himself, followed by the question of what then happens to his corpse. This thought naturally leads to a wish that Teucer, his nearest relative, should find the corpse and save it from desecration by his enemies causing Ajax to supplicate this of Zeus: 823-31. But the dread of a long and uneasy impaling prompts a further prayer to Hermes *psychopompos* for an easy and swift leap to death: 831-4. Next the survivors: uppermost in his mind of those left behind are his latest enemies, the Atreidai, (except for his designation of Hector as a hated enemy whose gift has brought him ill-fortune, Ajax does not curse the Trojans) so he summons the *Erinyes* to avenge his death on them in lines 835-8:

> καλῶ δ᾽ ἀρωγοὺς τὰς ἀεί τε παρθένους
> ἀεί θ᾽ ὁρώσας πάντα τἀν βροτοῖς πάθη,
> σεμνὰς Ἐρινῦς τανύποδας, μαθεῖν ἐμὲ
> πρὸς τῶν Ἀτρειδῶν ὡς διόλλυμαι τάλας,
> And I call for help upon those who are ever maidens and see ever all the sufferings of mortals, the dread Erinyes with long stride, so that they witness my destruction at the hands of the sons of Atreus.

The curse is extended to the entire Greek army (843-4):

> ἴτ᾽, ὦ ταχεῖαι ποίνιμοί τ᾽ Ἐρινύες,

γεύεσθε, μὴ φείδεσθε πανδήμου στρατοῦ:

Come, Erinyes, swift to punish, take your fill, do not spare the host entire!

Nothing has ameliorated his anger! The invocation to the *Erinyes* and the curse is the only way left to effect the revenge of which he was baulked by Athena. Including the army suggests he held them responsible for voting corruptly the award of the arms or to be otherwise complicit in the acts of the Atreidai and Odysseus, though no curse specifically naming Odysseus is spoken. But this reference could also be the dichotomous thinking that divides the world into friends and enemies: certainly the Greek forces are ranged as enemies after the foiled attack on the commanders.

Then Ajax's imagination moves to his survivors, to his parents (he has already bid farewell to Tecmessa and Eurysaces) and calls on the sun to carry the news to his aged parents (845-9) and in another flash-forward, imagines his mother's grievous lamentation (850-1). But death calls and it is time to speak his final farewells, first to the light (echoing the *Iliad* XVII.645-7 he dies in the light he requested of Zeus), then to ancestral Salamis and Athens, lastly to the springs and rivers and land of Troy that had nurtured him, enemy territory though they are. Once again, as in his first passionate *apostrophes* to the landscape, his glance begins at the furthest point, upwards at the heavens, then casting his mind's eye towards home, before shrinking to his immediate surroundings and finally to his destination, Hades, where he imagines himself speaking:

τοῦθ᾽ ὑμὶν Αἴας τοὔπος ὕστατον θροεῖ,
τὰ δ᾽ ἄλλ᾽ ἐν Ἅιδου τοῖς κάτω μυθήσομαι.(864-5)

This is the last word Ajax speaks to you; the rest I shall utter in Hades to those below.

This is the final flash-forward to the afterlife: Sophocles' Ajax will continue to speak, and speak *muthoi*, in the underworld. This line is another nod to Homer, this time to the silent and hostile Ajax referred to by Odysseus in the *Odyssey* XI.563-4.

Before we proceed to the aftermath, a look at Ajax's language shows evidence of constriction, with its universalizing tendency, over-generalizations, selective recall, and pronounced dichotomous thinking. Ajax uses "always", and "never" or "not ever" no fewer than thirteen times at 98, 117, 342, 379, 430, 448, 463, 570, 676, 682, 835, 836, 858. Youman, in a 1986 study, says: "Other words of absolutism used by Ajax are "every", "only" and "whole". He says that the Greek army hates him, and "all" Troy (459). Another time he allows that his "only" friends left are the Salaminian sailors (350, 359). Passionately he curses the "whole" army (844). He calls Odysseus a doer of "every" evil (379-380). The "whole" army in a mass will kill him (408). His father Telamon brought "all" glory home, he'll bring none (436)."[223] The deception speech (646-692) is also expressed in such terms: "all things" (646), "nothing", "most hated of all weapons" to be buried where "none can see", "never" good things since the present of the sword, the gifts of enemies are "no gifts" and bring "no profits", and in superlatives such as "most formidable", "most powerful" who yet paradoxically yield to what comes next. Since Knox's seminal study, scholars have generally interpreted this in terms of character, denoting the intractable, immovable nature of the intransigent Sophoclean hero,[224] but it is just as much characteristic of the thought processes of suicidal individuals, though dramatically pronounced and elevated with the extremism characteristic of mythic literature.

The question of where and how the suicide was staged has been the focus of scholarship, especially whether it took place offstage or, if enacted onstage, then how it

[223] Youman 1986: 398.
[224] Knox 1961.

was dramatized. An offstage suicide is usually explained required by the prohibition on death and spilling of blood within a religious sanctuary to Dionysos in which the dramatizations are taking place, but it is not clear that an *imitated* death and spilt blood would carry the same prohibition.[225] Burnett proposes that the curse is the prime reason for the onstage suicide, and I discuss this below. We know that Ajax dies "in the open" (scholiast at 813, 815a) and the departure of the chorus points to a change of scene to the seashore that Ajax declared to be his destination at 654-5. If retractable blades were in use at the time, then a leap upon the sword could take place with a screen brought up later as Garvie[226] suggests. I incline to agree with Liapis who suggests a three door *skene*, a visible sword with an onstage suicide and Tecmessa holding up a cloak, shielding it from all eyes at 915-19 to enable the actor playing Ajax to leave and be replaced by a dummy.[227] If retractable blades were not in use, then the suicide would not be visible and instead take place next to the grove indicated at 892 or on the *ekkyklema* which would be used to bring out the dummy corpse.[228] I prefer the latter suggestion as the firmly planted sword at 815-22 is not only the weapon of destruction but calls us to imagine how it would have looked "the blade straight up, in the early morning light" casting "a long shadow - like the needle of a giant sundial - across the *ekkyklema* on which Ajax stands. It is "Time's sword," moving even as Ajax speaks…As Time's sword moves "against" Ajax, so he moves to make Time stop" for death is "beyond time, beyond change".[229]

3.2.9 Suicide's Aftermath

The second half of the play mimics the first half, in both obvious and implicit ways: the actor who played Ajax returns as Teucer, a god rumours forth the death of Ajax (974-78),

[225] A view taken by Liapis 2015.
[226] Garvie 1998.
[227] Liapis 2015.
[228] Wiles 1997: 163-5.
[229] Golder 1990: 25.

the focus remains Ajax, though this time on his dead body, and Teucer utters a curse at the end that echoes Ajax's (1389-92). From a suicide perspective, the aftermath also dramatizes typical reactions from people bereaved by suicide: shock, grief, blame, anger, the search for reasons. The chorus, on hearing Tecmessa's cries of grief at 891, 896, 898-9, first fear for themselves and their threatened homecoming (900-02), next asking anxiously for confirmation as to the nature of the death. Only then do they mourn for Ajax's lonely death and blame themselves for neglecting him:

> ὤμοι ἐμᾶς ἄτας, οἷος ἄρ᾽ αἱμάχθης, ἄφαρκτος φίλων:
> ἐγὼ δ᾽ ὁ πάντα κωφός, ὁ πάντ᾽ ἄϊδρις, κατημέλησα.(908-12)
> Alas for my ruin! How you were bathed in blood, with no protection from your friends! And I all deaf, all ignorant, took no care!

Such is often the dilemma of friends and family bereaved by suicide: the signs are there to be read, like a prophecy, signs that in the aftermath appear all too clear, but which were earlier overlooked, ignored, and misunderstood. In consequence, the living endure immense shame, guilt and despair in the aftermath of a suicide. In the exchanges that follow with Tecmessa, the chorus lament the reasons for his death: his stubbornness, his suffering at the hands of and hatred of the Atreidai arising out of the contest of the arms (925-36). Tecmessa cries out twice, and the chorus approves both her expressions of grief (937-41), causing her to object that they *imagine* her grief, while she feels it:

> σοὶ μὲν δοκεῖν ταῦτ᾽ ἔστ᾽, ἐμοὶ δ᾽ ἄγαν φρονεῖν.(942)
>
> You can imagine this, but I can feel it all too well.

with which statement they concur (943). Tecmessa's retort that they merely *think* while she *feels,* is a sentiment which applies with greater force to Ajax's sufferings earlier in the play. In the presence of the impassioned hero, both the chorus and Tecmessa applied

reason and thought but insufficient feeling to the dilemma of the hero. Ajax on his part remains almost throughout caught in the whirlpool of disaster, the circling storm of blood which he describes in his first lines to the chorus. I say "almost": the exception is the deception speech where ambivalence is expressed and the wish to live co-exists with the desire for death and is described in lucid clarity, even while informed by the stark polarities of dichotomous thinking.

Tecmessa then speaks lines (her last in the play) that could stand as Ajax's epitaph (961-73). The death, so bitter to her, was Ajax's desire, which he fulfilled:

> ἐμοὶ πικρὸς τέθνηκεν ἢ κείνοις γλυκύς,
> αὐτῷ δὲ τερπνός: ὧν γὰρ ἠράσθη τυχεῖν
> ἐκτήσαθ᾽ αὐτῷ, θάνατον ὅνπερ ἤθελεν. (966-8)
> For me his death is bitter as it is sweet to them, but to him it brought pleasure; for he got for himself what he longed for, the death he wished for.

We next observe the reactions of Ajax's closest kin, his half-brother, arriving too late to prevent the suicide. On his entrance, Teucer (the actor who played Ajax returns as his brother) picks up the pain and lamentation in Tecmessa's last line and cries out in dread expectation of Ajax's death which has been rumoured, as though by a god; he has been tracking Ajax, much as Odysseus had been tracking him in the prologue (993-7). He laments Ajax's impetuous act of suicide (981-2) and for his own suffering, before asking about the dead man's son and quickly sending for Eurysaces. Teucer is proving a safe guardian as Ajax had wished and will do so for the rest of the play. He does not flinch from the unbearable: he bids the face of the dead man to be uncovered so he can look on the whole calamity. Addressing the dead Ajax, he berates the cruel rashness that has brought disaster, grieving for the pains that Ajax had sown for him (1004-5) and:

> ποῖ γὰρ μολεῖν μοι δυνατόν, εἰς ποίους βροτούς,

τοῖς σοῖς ἀρήξαντ᾽ ἐν πόνοισι μηδαμοῦ;(1006-7)

Where can I go, among what mortals, I who was not there to help you in your troubles?

Teucer has come too late to help Ajax in his troubles, and knows he will be blamed for the death, that he will be accused of having abandoned Ajax, that he is the lesser man whose coming will incense the aged father for loss of the greater hero. Teucer anticipates the reception he would get from Telamon (1008-21), whose character bears out the judgment of Ajax that he could never return to his homeland in disgrace: this is a man who even in good fortune finds it impossible to laugh with pleasure (1010-11), a man prone to rage, oppressive in his old age, who gets angry at nothing for the sake of a quarrel (1017-18) and who will accuse Teucer of cowardice or attempting to gain from the death of Ajax (1012-16). Teucer's description suggests that Ajax was right to dread a homecoming as disgraced hero.

Teucer is now in a somewhat similar position to Ajax in the first half: accused by the army as implicated in Ajax's guilt, hemmed in by enemies at Troy, alone now that his protector Ajax is dead (1021-3). Like Ajax, he cries out: What shall I do? (1024) He looks for reasons and finds comfort in believing that Hector was destined to kill Ajax even after the former's death via his sword (1027) and finding the hand of the gods in all that has occurred. Teucer's speech veers between despair and fatalism, between guilt and submission to the fates in an attempt to answer the insistent "why?" that haunts family and friends bereaved by suicide.

The *agones* takes place next, waged over the dead body of Ajax on stage. Sophocles has changed the traditional *agones* between Odysseus and Ajax to one between Teucer and the Atreidai and shifted it to the latter half of the play as an argument over the rites owing to an *enemy* corpse. Teucer has suffered the immediate blows of death and grief, and takes a partisan view, defending the dead man's reputation and honour,

repeating the feats of Ajax on the battlefield (1272-89), reminding the audience of his greatness and thereby rehabilitating the hero, one of the ten titular heroes of Athens. The stalemate is resolved by Odysseus. He has been absent from the play since the first scene, but his name has been repeated often, mainly as an enemy, gloating at Ajax's downfall. But his behaviour now will be another reversal of expectations, the last in this play that has overthrown so many expectations.

Odysseus' first words are spoken in response to the chorus, in contrast to Menelaus and Agamemnon who on their entrances have conspicuously ignored Ajax's men. Odysseus acknowledges the followers of Ajax and refers to the dead man as a "valiant corpse" (1319). Then, in *stichomythia* with Agamemnon, Odysseus prompts the latter to admit that he had insulted Teucer and so provoked the quarrel. But what did he *do*? asks Odysseus (1325). Having obtained Agamemnon's assurance to be allowed to advise him as a friend, Odysseus exhorts Agamemnon not to use force to trample on justice and cast out the corpse unburied (1332-5). He uses himself as the exemplar: even though he has cause to be Ajax's enemy during his life, he would not so dishonour him by denying his previous excellence as the second greatest after Achilles (1336-41). Agamemnon should take the same course and respect the laws of the gods and not seek to harm a noble man after he is dead (1342-5).

Agamemnon is reluctant to forego the pleasure to be derived from destroying a rival (1348). When Agamemnon expresses anger at the intransigence of Ajax, Odysseus changes tack and suggests that by refusing to yield to the entreaties of his friends, it is Agamemnon who is being intransigent. (1351-3) When Agamemnon insists that Ajax was an enemy, Odysseus agrees that Ajax had changed but that mutability applied to all. (1359) Agamemnon wants to be as unyielding as Ajax, if not he would appear to be coward, but Odysseus says he will appear just in the eyes of all Greeks if he does as Odysseus advises (1363). Agamemnon then asks directly: Do you want me to allow the

burial of this corpse? (1364) The response is just as direct: Yes, for I too shall come to this (1365). Agamemnon regards this as a claim made on the basis self-interest (1366), which Odysseus concedes in order to frame Agamemnon's grudging agreement as a favour to him (1367-8). But Agamemnon still refuses to sanction it: let it be your deed, not mine, he says, as my hatred shall be undying (1370-3). This exchange re-works many themes from the first half of the play: mutability, listening to friends' advice, behaving with honour, preserving reputation. From my perspective, Odysseus is making a powerful argument based on empathy and common feeling when he says:

> ἔγωγε: καὶ γὰρ αὐτὸς ἐνθάδ' ἵξομαι. (1365)
> I am; why, I myself shall come to this same pass!

Odysseus declares his friendship:

> καὶ νῦν γε Τεύκρῳ τἀπὸ τοῦδ' ἀγγέλλομαι,
> ὅσον τότ' ἐχθρὸς ἦ, τοσόνδ' εἶναι φίλος.(1376-7)
> And now for the future I proclaim to Teucer that I am as much a friend as I was then an enemy;

He offers to share in the burial labours but is rejected: his presence may offend the dead man. But Teucer thanks him and says that Odysseus had acted nobly and quite beyond his expectations:

> τούτῳ γὰρ ὢν ἔχθιστος Ἀργείων ἀνὴρ
> μόνος παρέστης χερσίν (1383-4)
> You were this man's greatest enemy among the Argives, but you alone stood by him actively,

The word *monos*, "alone", takes us back to Ajax's pleas to his men who were alone his friends. And yet in the end, Ajax's only friend among the Greek commanders turns out to be his earlier enemy whom he was preparing to whip to death in his tent. Importantly, the earlier failures of empathy are partially ameliorated; the character who opened the play and displayed empathy for the living Ajax, closes the play displaying empathy for the dead Ajax. This exercise and contrasting success and failure of empathy is one of the symmetries between the two halves of the play. In addition, once again, expectations have been overturned, enemies have become friends, the possibility of change is ever-present, as Ajax had movingly contemplated, and rejected, in his last words to his *philoi*. It is precisely the possibility of change that suicides close off by self-annihilation, the change that comes with time and all its unforeseen possibilities.

The touching action of Eurysaces helping Teucer to lift the corpse and Teucer's cry that the corpse still flows blood (1412-3) reinforce how the dead body has been the still centre of the action in this second half, and mimics the living in its flow of blood. Sommerstein emphasizes the star role awarded the dead Ajax. "Sophocles has done things with his corpse that, so far as we can tell, no one had previously thought of: making it the focus of a suppliant tableau; making it bleed like a living body; and making it implacably hostile to old enemies even when they have shown that they are now genuine friends."[230] He compares it to other dead bodies e.g. Polyneices in *Seven Against Thebes*, but suggests that Sophocles meant to echo Aeschylus' *Achilles* trilogy. As far as we can tell from the fragments, in *Myrmidons*, the body of Patroclus is carried in and in *Nereids* (the second play in the trilogy) the corpse may have stayed on stage during the mourning.

I have drawn comparisons between Ajax and Achilles in Homer but there were tragic treatments of Achilles that Sophocles may be echoing. Michelakis in his *Achilles in Greek Tragedy*,[231] suggests that in *Myrmidons*, a silent, mantled Achilles is surrounded

[230] Sommerstein 2015: 252.
[231] Michelakis 2001.

by a chorus of his men, who accuse him of being a despicable traitor of the common cause and threatened with stoning for his refusal to fight. The best of the Achaeans in Homer had turned, at least for a time, into the worst of the Greeks in tragedy: "Stoning is essentially the punishment by the community of the individual who has sinned against it."[232] Michelakis proposes that Achilles' lamentation for the dead Patroclus was followed by a move towards revenge. Sophocles may be adopting similar patterns in converting Ajax into an enemy of his own side. And his Ajax resembles "Aeschylus' Achilles (who) is as much a hero of the Homeric past as an aristocrat of the Athenian present, both an example and a problem, a hero and a villain."[233]

3.2.10 Motive

Before I conclude this chapter I take a brief look at treatment of motive in *Ajax*. Early scholars located Ajax's actions in personality and character. To Knox, the Sophoclean hero is *the* tragic hero: "the source of their action lies in them alone, nowhere else; the greatness of the action is theirs alone. One who, unsupported by the gods and in the face of human opposition, makes a decision which springs from the deepest layer of his individual nature, his *physis*, and then blindly, ferociously, heroically maintains that decision even to the point of self-destruction."[234]

Another strand locates the source in shame, *aidos*. Here I agree with Konstan that Sophocles' Ajax does not suffer from shame, since "In the text neither Ajax nor anyone else indicates shame as a reason for his suicide",[235] even if he expresses the impossibility of going home in terms of nakedness and shame before his father. When Ajax sings of fleeing and hiding, it is to avoid being killed by the whole army. Ajax is motivated by

[232] Parker 1983: 194-5.
[233] Michelakis 2002: 56.
[234] Knox 1964:5.
[235] Konstan 2006: 105.

rage, anger as defined by Aristotle "a desire, accompanied by pain, for a perceived revenge on account of a perceived slight" (*Rhetoric* 2.2, 1378a 31-2). As Konstan puts it,

> "Ajax sought to exact revenge for what he perceived as a derisive insult, but failed because of a temporary spell of insanity. Nothing in the play suggests that he regrets the attempt, or that he sees it as indicative of a flaw in his character. Thus, there is no basis for shame; the disgrace that he acknowledges derives exclusively from the award of Achilles' arms to Odysseus. He is distressed because his life is now in danger, and despite his enduring anger he no longer has an opportunity to avenge himself."[236]

Stanford, looking at the reasons given in the play, says that Ajax provides his own reason at 479-80. Three other motives for suicide are mentioned: the first two are mockery of his enemies and rejection by his father. The third, "suicide after ritual cursing of one's enemies, was a recognized form of revenge in ancient society."[237]

Suicide as revenge bears a closer examination. Anne Pippin Burnett's study of revenge in Attic drama uses *Ajax* as a key text. There was no "problem of revenge" for the ancients; for them revenge was the *solution*. "It was a form of necessary repayment, the opposite twin to the gracious return of favors that was called *charis*."[238] Ajax sees the award of the arms as a "gratuitous personal outrage", a "wilful attack on his honour", and so they owed him "repayment in the form of suffering...Ajax's anger is thus unjust but understandable, and Sophocles makes it almost admirable by showing that it came from the same passionate source that had moved the warrior to his greatest deeds."[239] For

[236] Ibid. 106.
[237] Stanford 1963: 289.
[238] Burnett 1998: xvi.
[239] Ibid. 83.

McHardy, revenge is Ajax's way of recovering honour through demonstrating his superiority as a fighter.[240]

The revenge motive accounts for what are for Burnett "three importunate peculiarities that are attached to the suicide of Ajax as Sophocles depicts it: first, that it is the single chosen deed performed by the principal; second, that it is acted out on stage; third, that it has no witness but the audience."[241] I suggest that these same elements are demanded by the nature of the suicide crisis, convincingly portrayed psychologically, and Sophocles' dramatic treatment of the theme. For Burnett, the on-stage suicide is so striking, that Sophocles must have had "more than sensationalism in mind when he asked his audience to watch while Ajax turns his living body into a corpse" and that "Ajax does not merely destroy himself in his final scene; he also curses, and his curse transforms his death into a renewed revenge."[242]

The first hint appears at 387, where Ajax asks Zeus how he might hurt his enemies, then die. Dying with a curse is the only way left, and explains Ajax's subsequent behaviour: scheming in order to gain access to the place where he will act, and preventing any interference via the deception speech "whose difficulties disappear when it is recognized as part of a vengeance scheme" since no one must interfere in "a deed that is verbal as well as physical".[243] I disagree that revenge automatically solves the profound and moving polarities of the deception speech. However Ajax's last speech does contain a powerful curse on his enemies; Burnett notes the similarities in Ajax's language with curses in *OC* 1375-92 and *Electra* 110-17, and with curse tablets and suggests that "the curse is indispensable to the play. It serves mechanically as the weapon of the second vengeance, the means by which Ajax ransoms his honour."[244] It is through the curse,

[240] McHardy 2008.
[241] Burnett 1998: 85.
[242] Ibid. 86.
[243] Ibid. 88 ftnote 68.
[244] Ibid. 93.

shared only with the audience that Sophocles makes the suicide "a noble instead of a shameful death. This audience, then, is in possession of exclusive knowledge shared only with one another, and the poet...Only they recognize the self-drawn black blood as an active force that engages the daimonic world, and only they know that the suicide has effectively revived the honor of this fallen Ajax."[245] The rest of the play is about making sense of the man and the death with Odysseus' argument amounting to recognizing the man's greatness, his excellence, while the exodus predicts in action the cult that will be established for Ajax.

For Burnett, it follows that "Ancient tragedy is thus fundamentally resistant to the imposition of contemporary social ethics or notions of psychology, and this is particularly true of the revenge plays, for their central action – the private deed of violent retaliation – is almost universally condemned by modern moralists and social scientists."[246] I hope to have shown that the suicidal crisis possessed its own psychological process as dramatized. Revenge adds another, subsidiary motive, and one recognized within the ancient tradition. Eurydice's death in *Antigone* is both out of grief and as retaliation against Creon; Antigone's too may have been a revenge suicide.[247] And this is a theme that later authors and playwrights in antiquity explicitly modelled on Sophocles' *Ajax*, as we shall see in the next chapter.

3.3 Conclusion

I hope to have demonstrated that Sophocles' depiction of Ajax's situation and the manner of his protagonist's response to the crisis embroiling him are clearly explicable within contemporary research findings of the suicidal mind. Given the emotionalism of the Greek tragic stage, and utilizing the tools available to evoke tragic emotion, Sophocles

[245] Ibid.
[246] Ibid. xv.
[247] Holst-Warhaft 1992: 132.

almost instinctively dramatized the workings of a person under intolerable stress while rendering the outward dramatic structure a suitable scaffold for the resulting emotional crises and its escalation into suicide. Then he expressed it in great and moving poetry to render its protagonist a fitting rival to Homer's Achilles, and an Athenian hero and self-proclaimed champion against Athens' enemies.

Chapter 4

Sophocles' *Ajax* from the Fourth Century BCE to the Seventeenth Century CE

The plays of Sophocles have never been entirely forgotten in the two and half millennia since their creation.[1] They were restaged from the fourth century BCE, and even when theatre died out in the following centuries, other art forms and scholarship kept the works alive. The shift from stage to text occurs with commentaries and annotations of his work taking place first in Alexandria and then later in Roman Imperial and Byzantine times;[2] it is clear that "some speakers of Greek and some students of Greek have been more or less continuously in touch with his work...since the fifth century BC."[3] Out of the seven extant plays, the preferred group of three, known as the Byzantine triad, were *Ajax*, *Electra*, and *OT* in that order, "with *Ajax* always ahead: the play that 'every schoolboy knew', according to Bishop Arethas. Certainly this is the play that crops up most often in manuscripts copied over the next 500 years."[4]

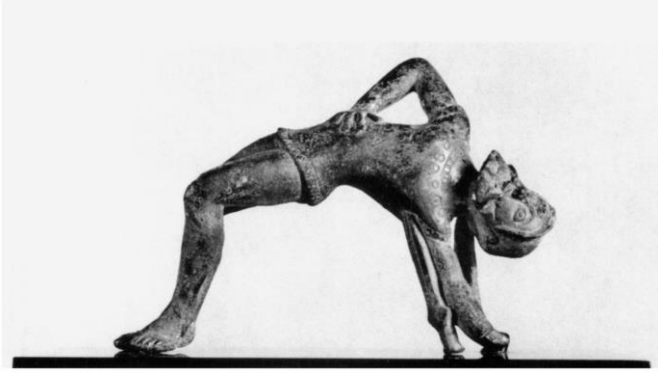
The reception of this most popular of plays post-Sophocles is the topic of this chapter with a particular focus on the suicide, that is, exploring how the suicidal crisis so accurately depicted by Sophocles was represented or framed in all important performance media during the succeeding centuries and within changing views of suicide. I will trace the references to *Ajax* in Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine times, followed by a discussion of Christian attitudes to suicide and how these may have impacted the play's reception, before briefly looking at the traces of the play through the Renaissance and up to the seventeenth century. The media explored are (4.1) the ancient Greek performance tradition, some of the evidence for which is contained in the scholia, and the adaptations

[1] Easterling 2003, Finglass 2012, Magnelli 2017.
[2] Magnelli 2017.
[3] Easterling 2003: 319.
[4] Ibid. 321, Magnelli 2017: 13. Arethas was Bishop of Caesarea working in the early tenth century CE.

into tragedy in Latin; (4.2) Singing Actors' Arias; (4.3) the importance of Ajax's suicide to Virgil's *Aeneid*; (4.4) Ajax pantomimes; (4.5) Rhetorical Tradition and Progymnasmata; (4.6) The Challenge of Christianity; (4.7) Selective Appropriations, and (4.8) Medieval and Renaissance Receptions.

4.1 Revivals and Stage Adaptations

Sophocles' plays were acknowledged as classics even within his own lifetime, and their performance history had certainly already begun by the fourth century BCE; the case of



Antigone makes this particularly clear.[5] In 386 BCE, the Athenian state permitted the revivals of old tragedies, and theatres began to be built across the Greek world, creating a demand for touring troupes of professional actors whose repertoire mainly consisted of the classic fifth-century plays.[6] These 'Artists' (*technitai*) of Dionysus, in well-organised troupes or *thiasoi* of actors, could break free from individual playwrights and individual sponsor cities, and make contracts directly with foreign cities or individuals, leading, shaping and being shaped by the tastes of patrons and the wider international theatre-going public.[7] Celebrity actors excelling in particular roles, such as the actor from the island of Zakynthos we shall meet shortly, who excelled as Ajax, would have had a role in this development.[8] The theatres of southern Italy and Sicily certainly saw the performances of the masterpieces of Athenian tragedy at this time, and even as early as the fifth century BCE,[9] so it is intriguing to find a small Italian (Etruscan) bronze, shown here, dated to the mid-fifth century, depicting a man,

[5] Hall, Edith 2011.
[6] Hall, Edith 2007.
[7] See Aneziri 2007.
[8] See the chapters by Hall, Easterling and Lightfoot in Easterling and Hall 2002.
[9] See Bosher 2012.

almost certainly Ajax, throwing himself on his sword with it entering his armpit. This depiction moves away from the usual artistic and literary sources of Ajax impaling himself on his sword either head down or up but with the sword thrust through his middle, as discussed in Chapter Two. The curved figure of the hero derives from the fact that its function as a grip or handle for a bronze *cista*. Davies purports to see in the moulding of the head the emotional travails of the eponymous hero, with its "wide and bulging eyes, with large, staring pupils; the thick hair of the eyebrows; the raised fringe of hair in front, framing the hero's forehead: all of these elements give to the face the wild, mad look of a satyr or *silenos* possessed by Dionysos"[10]

The figure's "dynamic and fleeting moment" may resemble both an acrobat and the figure of a satyr or dancing *silenos*, but these are associations appropriate for a mythic character who goes mad and kills himself with a leap upon a sword.[11] Aeschylus' version of the sword piercing Ajax through the armpit comes to mind here, but the leaping movement also suggests the on-stage suicide in Sophocles' version. Sadly, the mystery surrounding the reception of Greek myth, especially tragic myth, in Etruscan art,[12] makes it difficult for us to infer much more from this tantalising artefact.

Other playwrights, at least in the fourth century, also produced new tragedies on the themes which the great fifth-century writers had made famous, and in the fourth century Theodectes, a famous rhetorician and pupil of Isocrates, who had also studied with Plato and must have known Aristotle well, composed an *Ajax* which seems to have been much discussed.[13] Fragments are quoted by Aristotle in the *Rhetoric* (2.23, 1399b28, 1400a27-8; 3.1416b12-17 = *TgrF* 1.72 F 1) and appear to focus on the debate between

[10] Davis 1971: 149.
[11] Ibid 151-2.
[12] This is the subject of an important research project currently being conducted at the University of Leiden under the supervision of Professor Bouke van der Meer: see the website https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/research/research-projects/archaeology/greek-myths-in-etruscan-art with further bibliography.
[13] Wright 2016: 166-8.

Odysseus and Ajax for the arms, in which Aeschylus had of course been interested (see above pp. 77-80). Theodectes was a highly trained rhetorician, and Aristotle's admiration for the rhetorical elements in tragedy may have influenced his choice to quote from this play.[14]

An important source for the way in which later antiquity saw, or reconstructed in their minds, performative aspects of Sophocles' *Ajax* is constituted by the scholiasts, Hellenistic and Byzantine scholars who annotated the plays and (especially in the case of the latter) helped to preserve them. These commentaries were seen as aids for readers and supplements to an understanding of the written text.[15] While the Alexandrian scholars would have been exposed to and influenced by contemporary performances, Byzantine copyists knew these plays only as texts to be studied by scholars and in schools, and their interest in such matters would be limited largely to what was necessary for the reader to comprehend the written word.[16] The use of the Byzantine triad as school texts has been advanced as a possible reason why these survived from the approximately 120 plays that Sophocles wrote. But even the Byzantine scholia probably preserve crucial information from Hellenistic times, and thus of Hellenistic performance practices.

Ajax has considerably more, and fuller annotation than any of the other plays by Sophocles, which is not surprising given that this play seems to have been the one most regularly studied in later antiquity (probably on account of rhetorical interest in its two flamboyant *agones*), as it certainly was in the Byzantine period.[17] However, the extensive notes rarely cite earlier scholars by name which "may suggest that they have gone through a particularly thorough process of filtering and re-working."[18] The French scholar

[14] Xanthakis-Karamanos 1979.
[15] Falkner 2008.
[16] Ibid. 344-5.
[17] Easterling 2006b: 24.
[18] Ibid.

Jouanna proposes that a single commentary written perhaps at Alexandria became the source of most of the existing scholia.[19]

Easterling suggests that the focus on the later period was on readers of the plays and that "the commentators on Greek literary classics were operating in a familiar theoretical context. The critical vocabulary of the scholia bears a close family resemblance to that of ancient writers on rhetorical and literary theory: there is a strong interest in what is *pithanon*, convincing, lifelike, in terms of plot and portrayal of character."[20] Character portrayal was important in pantomime and rhetoric, as discussed above. At the same time, the commentators display strong interest in "the imagined spectator / listener, his emotions, including pleasure, and his moral instruction."[21] *Pithanon* "is often understood in terms of psychological motivation" and closely identified with this "are the notes on words, staging or action which evoke an emotional response. These regularly use pathos-words as terms of approval."[22] Thus scholia on *Ajax* lines 66, 312, 421, 433, 1123 pay attention to the degrees of emotional effect wrought by Sophocles, but also speak "approvingly of the range of performance related issues – gesture, blocking, delivery, music, costumes, stage machinery. They understand that the language is often only comprehensible in terms of the actor and the physical stage…"[23]

But the *type* of emotional response matters: "In the scholia performance is consistently regarded in terms of the experience of the spectator, with attention to how the representation of suffering brings pleasure if represented properly and distress if not."[24] One scholiast remarks on the dramatic appearance of Ajax on the *ekkyklema* amidst the sheep (346), that it evokes astonishment, *ekplexis*, in the spectator, and Aristotle had praised the arousal of *ekplexis* in his *Poetics* (1454a4, 1455a17). However,

[19] Ibid. 23 Footnote 9.
[20] Ibid. 25.
[21] Ibid. 29.
[22] Ibid. 25.
[23] Falkner 2008: 348.
[24] Ibid. 354.

off-stage death occurs to spare pain and distress to the audience, as the scholia on Euripides' *Hecuba* 484, for example, explains. The unprecedented on-stage suicide of Sophocles' Ajax therefore is a cause for uneasiness and prompts an exploration of possible explanations. The scholiast on 815, perhaps revealing his training in Peripatetic aesthetics, repeats the suggestion that Sophocles may have been intending to astonish (*ekplexai*) in placing the suicide in full view when he comments as follows:

> The scene changes to a deserted place, where Ajax prepares the sword and delivers a speech before his death. For it would be ridiculous for him to enter and fall upon his sword without saying anything. Such scenes are infrequent among the older poets (*tois palaiois*), for they are accustomed to report events through messengers. What is the explanation? In *Thracian Women* Aeschylus had already reported the death of Ajax through a messenger. And so perhaps wishing to innovate (*kaiontomein*) and not to follow in the footsteps of another, or rather wishing to astonish (*ekplexai*) he placed the deed in full view (*hup' opsin)*. It is irreverent and unfair to randomly criticise one of the older poets.[25]

This scholar clearly finds the overt suicide troubling to his sense of dramatic propriety, and so tries to find a good reason why Sophocles chose it. There are limits to what is acceptable even if, in general, as Falkner puts it: "The quality of *enargeia*, the ability to make vivid and 'real' through language is crucial in the Greek scholia generally, and is linked in particular to its effectiveness in producing emotions."[26] This suggests close familiarity with the *ethos*, or imagined *ethos*, of theatrical productions and, importantly, with the power of suffering to evoke feelings in spectator and reader alike. But in suggesting that there is real innovation here, the scholiast not only shows himself sensitive to the Athenian cultural characteristic of innovativness, or *kainotomein*, on which they

[25] Quoted in Falkner 354-5.
[26] Ibid. 355.

prided themselves,[27] but he also partly pre-empts my interpretation in the previous chapter. There I suggested that Sophocles has played so much on the ambivalence that he is forced, by the inexorable logic of his presentation, to enact the suicide, almost as if the scene is written to accommodate the poetry.

But the powerful *emotional* quality of scenes in Sophocles' *Ajax* has clearly struck the scholars whose observations underlie these responses. A scholion on the suicide at *Ajax* 864 also comments on the staging:

> It must be conjectured that he falls on his sword, and the actor must be strongly built so as to bring the audience to the point of visualizing Ajax, as is said of Timotheos of Zakynthos, whose acting carried along and enthralled the spectators [so much] that he acquired the 'tag' Sphageus [The Slayer].[28]

The key action of the suicide leap required a strongly built actor to create the verisimilitude of the suicide but also to evoke the Homeric Ajax, bulwark of the Greeks. In whatever manner Ajax's suicide was staged (and subsequent productions need not have repeated the initial staging but introduced creative and more muscular adaptations), this act of physical prowess captured the attention to such an extent that the sword attached itself to the actor, and lent its name to some versions with the play being often referred to after it: in the hypothesis to the play, we are told that the Peripatetic student of Aristotle Dicaearchus called it *Ajax's Death* (*Aiantos thanaton*).[29]

The suicide leap, however, was not the only dramatic depiction to excite attention: the ancient hypothesis to the play also mentions an *Ajax Mastigophoros*, suggesting that

[27] See D'Angour (2011).
[28] Stephanis (1988) number 2416, who dates Timotheos to the fifth or fourth century BCE on the ground that the nickname, which probably comes from the opening line of Ajax's tragic suicide speech (815), may have been given him in a comedy. See also Martin von Wagner Museum, inv. H 4600, and Lada-Richards 2002: 398.
[29] In A. Dain, P. Mazon, and J. Irigoin, *Sophocle* II (Paris 1981) 7. See Verhasserlt 2015: 610.

Ajax's first entrance on stage, mad and whip in hand, must have been equally striking.[30] We shall see that suicide and madness were two of the motifs danced in pantomime. But Sophocles' *Ajax* also seems to have been a favourite of the Roman Republican tragedians. Livius Andronicus produced an *Ajax Mastigophorus* or *Flagellifer*.[31] Ennius' *Ajax* dealt with the debate with Ulysses and the suicide, as did Accius' play by the same name.[32] Two lines of Accius' *Ajax* are preserved: "They who with the Greeks did match arms un-yieldingly", and "Welling out his life's breath, the warm blood-streams gush forth".[33] Pacuvius also wrote a *Judgement of Arms* (*Armorum Iudicium* (Cicero, *Brutus*, 64.228-9). Although only tiny fragments of these four important tragedies remain, their composition and fame are crucial in terms of the reception of Ajax and his suicide in Latin poetry, especially Virgil's *Aeneid* (see below section 4.3).[34]

4.2 Ajax and the Singing Actors

Beginning in the fourth century BCE, an important development in the performance of tragedy was the emergence of specialist tragic singers, *tragoidoi*, whose performance of the lyric monodies in the canonical tragedies became celebrated, and who then assembled concert programmes of songs excerpted from their original plays. Some tragoidoi travelled great distances and amassed huge earnings.[35] "Hellenistic *tragoidoi* concentrated the pleasure their performances offered by excerpting the most delicious solo lyric highlights from tragedies. Solo recitals were first to rival and, together with pantomime, eventually to supersede the performance of whole tragic texts."[36] Plays featuring the madness and death of Ajax seem to have been particularly popular in this

[30] Lada-Richards 2002: 165.
[31] Warmington, *Remains of Old Latin* vol. 2, F 15-17.
[32] F 9-11 in Goldberg and Manuwald*, Fragmentary Republican Latin*, Volume II: Ennius.
[33] *Aiax* 1R and 2R.
[34] Ajax's suicide may also have been a comic theme as evoked by Augustus, who destroyed the poem he was writing because his hero had fallen on a sponge: Suetonius *Augustus* 85.
[35] See especially Hall 2002.
[36] Hall 2002: 13

type of performance, as might be expected given the use Sophocles made of Ajax's singing voice and the importance of funereal lamentation to the play. There is a papyrus containing musical annotations to a tragic song,[37] a lament in the voice of a female character for Ajax, which suggest it was a favourite for performance by virtuoso tragic singers on tour; it "may well be a new setting of a solo from an old tragedy made for a concert singer in the Roman imperial period."[38] The monody played on the vowel *ai-* as both a part of Ajax's name and of the lament sound *aiai*: his name is sung 'Ai-ai-i-an' rather than 'Ai-an'.[39] Similar word play also features, interestingly, in Ovid's very brief account of Ajax's suicide in *Metamorphoses* XIII.382-98. The exiguous fragments of Pacuvius' lost Roman Republican tragedy *The Judgement of Arms* show that it also included sung *cantica* as well as iambic speeches,[40] making it suitable, perhaps, for rendition by the experts in *tragoedia cantata* popular in the 1st and 2nd centuries CE.

4.3 Tragedy into the Augustan Roman period: Virgil's Dido in the *Aeneid*

The suicide motif was also worked in poetic form. I would like to examine closely Virgil's Dido in the *Aeneid*, a poem in which the tragic register and tragic allusions abound.[41] While Virgil treats the suicide in both gendered and political ways, he also delineates psychological states that resemble those dramatized by Sophocles in the *Ajax*. As Dugan puts it: "Although comparative allusions to Ajax and Dido at face value might seem patently absurd…the similarity between these doomed and destructive voices in terms of context, hubris and immeasurable rage is considerable."[42]

There are also broader thematic parallels. Like Ajax, Dido is a heroine modelled on heroic values, as well as a female double of the titular hero, Aeneas: courageous,

[37] Berlin Papyrus 6870, lines 16-19 = *TrGF* adesp. 683a. See West 1992: 203, 320 and Hall 2002: 2-3.
[38] Hall 2002: 21-23.
[39] West 1992: 203, 320.
[40] Hall 2002: 25.
[41] Panoussi 2002
[42] Dugan 2018: 62.

energetic, a wise ruler, building a new city for her people who she led to freedom from tyranny. When Dido first encounters Aeneas in the poem, she generously saves the Trojan refugees, welcoming and offering them a home in the new city. Thanked fulsomely by Aeneas she responds (628-30):

> "Me quoque per multos similis fortuna labores
> iactatam hac demum voluit consistere terra.
> Non ignara mali, miseris succurrere disco."
>
> "Me, too, has a like fortune driven through many toils, and willed that in this land I should at last find rest. Not ignorant of ill I learn to aid distress."[43]

Learning from her own experience of being a refugee, having suffered betrayal and the death of loved ones, and led her people in a desperate flight to begin a new life, Dido has a rich store of empathy for others in similar distress, and is quick to aid them. Victim of Venus and Cupid she may be, in the former's attempts to keep her son safe, but what moves Dido at the outset is Aeneas' plight, so similar to her own.

But just as at the beginning of the *Ajax*, madness also figures from the start of Dido's story, for the poet associates her almost immediately with madness and frenzy, and once in love, these associations increase. Love is described twice as a "wound" and also madness: "Unhappy Dido burns, and through the city wanders in frenzy" (4.68-9, Uritur infelix Dido, totaque vagatur/urbe furens). This frenzy is perilous and the peril becomes real after the passion is consummated; Dido, no longer hiding the liaison, becomes careless for her reputation and by her preference for the Trojan converts the neighbouring rulers into her enemies. Thus her mad passion isolates Dido, much as Ajax is isolated after his abortive attack on the commanders converts former friends and allies into enemies. For both Ajax

[43] All quotations are from Virgil: v.1: *Eclogues; Georgics; Aeneid* bks. 1-6 (Loeb Classical Library) 1999.

and Dido, their madness also threatens their previous achievements and reputation. Virgil's description of the abandonment of Dido's enterprise (the building programme and games all grind to a halt without the leader's guiding hand), is a depiction of Dido's growing isolation through her single-minded obsession with Aeneas: she is missing from the activities of nation-building. Aeneas becomes her stand-in, directing the enterprise (4.259-61) and his impending desertion serves to push Dido into greater isolation. Her reactions to the word of Aeneas' departure are both personal and political, revealing her similarity to Ajax after the attack on the commanders: abandoned by her kin, surrounded by enemies, estranged from her own people. But Ajax is not the only intertext here: during the confrontation with Aeneas, she is by turns Medea upbraiding Jason with his broken oaths and Tecmessa supplicating for compassion from Ajax on the basis of reciprocity when Dido supplicates Aeneas (4.314-19):

> "Per ego has lacrimas dextramque tuam te
> (quando aliud mihi iam miserae nihil ipsa reliqui)
> per conubia nostra, per inceptos hymenaeos,
> si bene quid de te merui, fuit aut tibi quicquam
> dulce meum, miserere domus labentis, et istam—
> oro, si quis adhuc precibus locus—exue mentem".
> "by the marriage that is ours, by the nuptial rites begun, if ever I deserved well of you, or if anything of mine has been sweet in your sight, pity a falling house, and if yet there be any room for prayers, put away, I pray, this purpose."

She names him as the cause of her "falling house": "Because of you the Libyan tribes and Numidian chiefs hate me, the Tyrians are my foes; because of you I have also lost my honour and that former fame by which alone I was winning a title to the stars." (4.320-3). Aeneas' desertion will leave her defenceless and preyed upon by her enemies: "To whose mercy do you leave me on the point of death?" (4.323). The desertion is also unbearably

personal: without even a child of his to comfort her, she is “utterly vanquished and forlorn” (4.327-30). Worst of all, he has become a stranger, she addresses him as “guest—since that alone is left from the name of husband” (4.323-4).

Aeneas, in his response, displays an abysmal failure of empathy; failing to engage with Dido’s sense of betrayal and loss, he denies that he ever meant to steal away without telling her (though he does later), denies that he ever meant marriage (“I never held out a bridegroom’s torch or entered such a compact” (4.338-9).), and implicitly rejects her offer of ruling in Carthage, declaring that if he had free choice to indulge his desires, he would raise a new Troy in the old country, and why should she grudge him the founding of a new country? “We, too, have the right to seek a foreign realm.” (4.350). He ends with “Cease to inflame yourself and me with your complaints. It is not by my wish that I make for Italy.” (4.360-1). His catalogue of reasons, very much like Jason’s to Medea, by failing to acknowledge Dido’s pain and grief, the justice of her pleas, lacks compassion. This failure of empathy is likened by Dido to the heartlessness of a creature begotten of a mountain and suckled by tigresses, and makes her lament:

> nam quid dissimulo aut quae me ad maiora reservo?
> num fletu ingemuit nostro? num lumina flexit?
> num lacrimas victus dedit aut miseratus amantem est? 368-70
> For why hide my feelings? For what greater wrongs do I hold myself back? Did he sigh while I wept? Did he turn on me a glance? Did he yield and shed tears or pity her who loved him? What shall I say first? What next?

Dido calling Aeneas “guest” reminds the reader of her own very different welcome to a shipwrecked refugee and Aeneas’ extravagant promise of gratitude at their first meeting. His return is the opposite of her empathy and care, and poor recompense for one who had saved his life and that of his followers and generously shared her kingdom with him.

As Dido witnesses the preparations for departure of the Trojan fleet, the poet apostrophizes her and accurately depicts the ambivalences of love, swinging between hate and love: "What feelings then were yours, Dido, at such a sight! …O relentless Love, to what do you not drive the hearts of men. Once more she must needs break into tears, once more assail him with prayer, and humbly bow down her pride to love, lest she leave anything untried and go to death in vain." (4.408-15) Already having ceased to be wholly frank with her sister Anna, earlier called the "sharer of her heart" (4.8) but whom Dido now blames for encouraging her love, she sends Anna to beg for her, to persuade Aeneas' to stay a little longer, to wait out the winter storms; she is to bargain "for empty time.., for peace and reprieve for my frenzy, till fortune teach my vanquished soul to grieve." (4.433-4) His refusal denies Dido time to come to terms with her grief, and here the suicidal predicament is made clear: Dido prays for death and is weary of the sun. "And to make her more surely fulfil her purpose and leave the light" (4.452) she is confronted by signs of doom everywhere: in the auguries foretelling death, in the voices from the shrine she built to Sychaeus, in the owl's wailing songs and the fearful stories of the seers. (4.460-5) Her sleep is haunted by nightmare visions:

> agit ipse furentem
> in somnis ferus Aeneas, semperque relinqui sola sibi,
> semper longam incomitata videtur
> ire viam et Tyrios deserta quaerere terra, (465-68)
>
> In her sleep fierce Aeneas himself drives her in her frenzy; and ever she seems to be left lonely, ever wending, companionless, an endless way, and seeking her Tyrians in a land forlorn.

The multiplication of terms for loneliness movingly invokes the desolation of despair but is followed immediately by similes describing Dido's desire for death as madness: she is like Pentheus and his two suns, and Orestes driven mad by his mother's Furies, (4.469-73) neither of whom killed himself. Virgil ascribes the suicidal impulse to madness, madness

like an infection to be caught when one's defences are down: "So when, outworn with anguish, she caught the madness and resolved to die, in her own heart she determines the time and manner, and accosts her sorrowful sister, with mien that veils her plan and on her brow a cloudless hope". (4.474-7) Madness does not prevent premeditation and planning: Dido deceives with a spurious manner and a plausible story of needing magic to release her, for which a pyre must be built on which she will burn the belongings of the Trojan. (4.478-98) Anna is deceived, as Tecmessa and the chorus are deceived, but Anna's belief is based on Dido's earlier assimilation of her loss of Sychaeus. (4.500-3)

The ritual done, in the hush of night, with the world asleep, Dido wrestles with herself in the manner of the tragic hero, asking: "What shall I do?" (4.534), she contemplates her choices: who could she court, after having previously rejected all suitors? Could she ask to be taken on board the ships of the Trojans? But since Aeneas has betrayed her, she is now the enemy of all Trojans. Could she pursue with her own men? But they have ceased being seamen and the weather is unfriendly. Regret takes over as she blames Anna for encouraging her and wishes she had kept faith with Sychaeus. Shame at her dishonor, at not having kept her "sinless" state, is the point at which she decides to die: death is the answer. (4.534-52) This reflection over her choices re-casts her passionate objections spoken earlier to Aeneas, much as Ajax's spoken words at 430-80 rehearse his earlier passionately sung verses. Again, as in the *Ajax,* the suicide does not follow immediately, but at dawn, at the sight of the shore empty of ships, the desertion now final and irrevocable, that the final impetus to suicide takes place, and revenge becomes the main motive. This gap of time follows the sequence in the *Ajax,* with the declaration of intent taking place first, but the deed removed in time and preceded by a curse. Dido cries aloud that Carthage has been made a laughing-stock (echoes of Medea and Ajax), wishes she had rent Aeneas limb from limb (Medea slaughtering her brother), or served the son to the father in a meal

(Procne, Tereus and Itys), that she had destroyed the whole army before killing herself (Ajax cursing the entire Greek army). (4.590-606) Virgil works Dido's curse into a generational curse and an *aition* for the enmity between Rome and Carthage (4.622-29) in an echo of Ajax's curse on the Spartans at 835-44. Sending away her old nurse, Dido climbs the pyre on which all the artefacts have been placed and then like Deianeira, bids farewell to her wedding couch. Her last words are her own epitaph, like a hero: she recalls her achievements in avenging her husband, punishing her brother and building Carthage. (4.655-8) When she falls on the sword, the lamentations are as if the city itself is falling: echoes of the fall of Troy and of historical Carthage itself. (4.669-71) But unlike Ajax's swift death, her agony is prolonged until released by the gods because she had killed herself before her time "in the heat of sudden frenzy". (4.697) This delayed release perhaps echoes Athena's relenting in Sophocles: Dido's death was not ordained by the gods, but her own act of impassioned madness and revenge. The delay also serves the poet to include a passage of Anna lamenting the dying Dido at 4.675-85, in terms that recall Tecmessa and Teucer in the *Ajax*.

Dido and Aeneas' last encounter in *Aeneid* 6.440 – 477 owes nothing to the *Ajax* but goes back to Odysseus' meeting with Ajax in the underworld in the *Odyssey*. Dido, wandering hand in hand with Sychaeus in the Mourning Fields hears Aeneas' plea for a response to the last word he is able to speak to her:

extremum fato, quod te adloquor, hoc est. (466)

This is the last word Fate suffers me to say to you.

Dido turns away, her expression likened to flint or rock, mirroring Aeneas' own inhuman response to her earlier plea for pity:

illa solo fixos oculos aversa tenebat

nec magis incepto vultum sermone movetur,
quam si dura silex aut stet Marpesia cautes. (469-71)

She, turning away, kept her looks fixed on the ground and no more changes her countenance as he essays to speak than if she were set in hard flint or Marpesian rock.

Virgil has retained the structure as well as key dramatic devices from the *Ajax*: the hero's impassioned verses, followed by the speech of reasons for killing himself before the lonely death, the sense of both outer entrapment and inner desolation, and the revenge curse that requires the spilling of blood. The psychological descriptions are similarly powerful: the suicidal state of loneliness, isolation, sense of abandonment and anguish arise here out of Dido's passionate choice of Aeneas, his subsequent betrayal and her own sense of self-betrayal, even as madness and frenzy attributed to love are made much more direct causes.

The empathy of the poets, Sophocles and Virgil both, is that ability to imagine the protagonist's agony and suicide and express it in poetic form; as Holford-Stevens says: "It is in spirit, not merely letter, that it is right to speak of 'Dido's markedly Sophoclean suicide.'...Vergil shares Sophocles' empathy with both sides in a conflict...Common to the two poets, moreover, is their ability to confront us, not with examination questions in abstract morality, but with the realities of human conduct."[44] Whether directly or indirectly through Republican Latin tragedy, Sophocles' *Ajax* helped to make the treatment of the suicidal Dido in the great Augustan epic the compelling psychological portrait it has always been acknowledged to be.

4.4 *Ajax* Danced in Pantomime

In the later Roman Empire, it is likely that more tragedy was consumed in the danced medium of pantomime (also known as *tragoedia saltata*) than through any other kind of

[44] Holford-Stevens 1999: 234

performance. In pantomime we see dramatic elements of the *Ajax* transformed into dance. Pantomime has its beginnings in the early empire and remained popular for around 600 years. The sophist Lucian, who wrote his *On the Dance* between 162 and 165 CE, refers repeatedly to tragedy:

> Αἱ δὲ ὑποθέσεις κοιναὶ ἀμφοτέροις, καὶ οὐδέν τι διακεκριμέναι τῶν τραγικῶν αἱ ὀρχηστικαί, πλὴν ὅτι ποικιλώτεραι αὗται καὶ πολυμαθέστεραι καὶ μυρίας μεταβολὰς ἔχουσαι.
>
> The themes of tragedy and the dance are common to both, and there is no difference between those of the one and those of the other, except that the themes of the dance are more varied and more unhackneyed, and they contain countless vicissitudes. *Dance* 31[45]

In Lucian's descriptions, pantomime has moved elements that were offstage in Attic tragedy, to the foreground, including the depiction of both madness and suicide.[46] Sophocles' onstage depiction of Ajax's suicide may well have formed an impetus to the development of pantomime; it was sufficiently new in its time and its sheer theatricality could be attractive for embodiment in dance. But many tragic figures were danced on stage, using movement and body to express emotions that earlier were mostly expressed through song and spoken word in tragedy.[47] Regrettably, almost all libretti have been lost and only written descriptions of dance remain.[48]

Offstage actions brought on-stage in danced pantomime included childbirth and sex, cannibalism and metamorphosis, embodied in stylized movement. And not only suicide but the madness: "With respect to Ajax's legend in particular, it is easy to see why tragedy's 'backgrounded' space of mad action would have ignited a pantomime's

[45] Lucian *On Dance* 1936 Volume V Loeb Classical Library 302 Translated by A. M. Harmon.
[46] Lada-Richards 2007.
[47] Ibid. 35.
[48] For the probable exception, the Barcelona *Alcestis*, see below.

imagination: a choreography of frenzied leaps across the Trojan plain would have offered the aspiring star a splendid opportunity for self-display and self-promotion."[49]

How were the depictions danced? In an epigram attributed to Lucilius, Neronian poet, in the *Greek Anthology* 11.254:

> Πάντα καθ' ἱστορίην ὀρχούμενος, ἓν τὸ μέγιστον
> τῶν ἔργων παριδὼν ἠνίασας μεγάλως.
> τὴν μὲν γὰρ Νιόβην ὀρχούμενος, ὡς λίθος ἔστης,
> καὶ πάλιν ὢν Καπανεύς, ἐξαπίνης ἔπεσες·
> ἀλλ' ἐπὶ τῆς Κανάκης ἀφυῶς, ὅτι καὶ ξίφος ἦν σοι
> καὶ ζῶν ἐξῆλθες· τοῦτο παρ' ἱστορίην.
> You played in the ballet everything according to the story, but by overlooking one very important action you highly displeased us. Dancing the part of Niobe you stood like a stone, and again when you were Capaneus you suddenly fell down. But in the case of Canace you were not clever, for you had a sword, but yet left the stage alive; that was not according to the story.[50]

The dancer successfully imitates the stillness of a rock (Niobe turned to stone) and a fall from a height after being struck by lightning (Capaneus struck down by Zeus as he ascends the walls of Thebes), but not a heroine impaling herself on her sword: Canace, who gives birth to a child after incest with her brother Macareus, is sent a sword by her father by which she kills herself.[51] There is of course a comic trope at play here: the actor cannot kill himself in reality, but the epigram points to the clear expectation of a danced suicide. Ajax's suicide would be similarly expected to be staged, most likely as an athletic leap upon a sword planted in the ground, and perhaps as the climax to the pantomime; he would be carried from the stage in imitation of a corpse.

[49] Lada –Richards 2007: 36.

[50] *The Greek Anthology*, Loeb Classical Library Harvard *Volume IV: Book 10: The Hortatory and Admonitory Epigrams. Book 11: The Convivial and Satirical Epigrams.*

[51] Related also by Ovid in *Heroides.*

Hall suggests that "Dying on stage was one of the features of pantomime that most clearly distinguished it from classical tragedy, which tended to avoid it." She proposes that the Barcelona Alcestis was a libretto for pantomime with five roles, where Alcestis dies on stage, and though hers is not a suicide: "In all of ancient literature the scene which provides the clearest and certainly the most famous parallel is the death of Dido in the fourth book of the Aeneid."[52] That episode, as we saw above, was also modelled on the *Ajax*, making this a Sophoclean legacy.

But, suicide apart, it is Ajax's madness that becomes the subject of a discussion of the dancer's art in Lucian. I quote this in full as the episode contains elements of the *Ajax*:

> ὀρχούμενος γὰρ τὸν Αἴαντα μετὰ τὴν ἧτταν εὐθὺς μαινόμενον, εἰς τοσοῦτον ὑπερεξέπεσεν ὥστε οὐχ ὑποκρίνασθαι μανίαν ἀλλὰ μαίνεσθαι αὐτὸς εἰκότως ἄν τινι ἔδοξεν. ἑνὸς γὰρ τῶν τῷ σιδηρῷ ὑποδήματι κτυπούντων τὴν ἐσθῆτα κατέρρηξεν, ἑνὸς δὲ τῶν ὑπαυλούντων τὸν αὐλὸν ἁρπάσας τοῦ Ὀδυσσέως πλησίον ἑστῶτος καὶ ἐπὶ τῇ νίκῃ μέγα φρονοῦντος διεῖλε τὴν κεφαλὴν κατενεγκών, καὶ εἴ γε μὴ ὁ πῖλος ἀντέσχεν καὶ τὸ πολὺ τῆς πληγῆς ἀπεδέξατο, ἀπωλώλει ἂν ὁ κακοδαίμων Ὀδυσσεύς, ὀρχηστῇ παραπαίοντι περιπεσών. ἀλλὰ τό γε θέατρον ἅπαν συνεμεμήνει τῷ Αἴαντι καὶ ἐπήδων καὶ ἐβόων καὶ τὰς ἐσθῆτας ἀνερρίπτουν, οἱ μὲν συρφετώδεις καὶ αὐτὸ τοῦτο ἰδιῶται τοῦ μὲν εὐσχήμονος οὐκ ἐστοχασμένοι οὐδὲ τὸ χεῖρον ἢ τὸ κρεῖττον ὁρῶντες, ἄκραν δὲ μίμησιν τοῦ πάθους τὰ τοιαῦτα οἰόμενοι εἶναι· οἱ ἀστειότεροι δὲ συνιέντες μὲν καὶ αἰδούμενοι ἐπὶ τοῖς γινομένοις, οὐκ ἐλέγχοντες δὲ σιωπῇ τὸ πρᾶγμα, τοῖς δὲ ἐπαίνοις καὶ αὐτοὶ τὴν ἄνοιαν τῆς ὀρχήσεως ἐπικαλύπτοντες, καὶ ἀκριβῶς ὁρῶντες ὅτι οὐκ Αἴαντος ἀλλὰ ὀρχηστοῦ μανίας τὰ γιγνόμενα ἦν. οὐ γὰρ ἀρκεσθεὶς τούτοις ὁ γενναῖος ἄλλο μακρῷ τούτου γελοιότερον ἔπραξε· καταβὰς γὰρ εἰς τὸ μέσον ἐν τῇ βουλῇ δύο ὑπατικῶν μέσος ἐκαθέζετο, πάνυ δεδιότων μὴ καὶ αὐτῶν τινα ὥσπερ κριὸν μαστιγώσῃ λαβών. *Dance* 83

[52] Hall 2008: 275. See also Jory 2008 and Hunt 2008.

> In presenting Ajax going mad immediately after his defeat, he so overleaped himself that it might well have been thought that instead of feigning madness he was himself insane; for he tore the clothes of one of the men that beat time with the iron shoe, and snatching a flute from one of the accompanists, with a vigorous blow he cracked the crown of Odysseus, who was standing near and exulting in his victory; indeed, if his watch-cap had not offered resistance and borne the brunt of the blow, poor Odysseus would have lost his life through falling in the way of a crazy dancer. The pit, however, all went mad with Ajax, leaping and shouting and flinging up their garments; for the riff-raff, the absolutely unenlightened, took no thought for propriety and could not perceive what was good or what was bad, but thought that sort of thing consummate mimicry of the ailment, while the politer sort understood, to be sure, and were ashamed of what was going on, but instead of censuring the thing by silence, they themselves applauded to cover the absurdity of the dancing, although they perceived clearly that what went on came from the madness of the actor, not that of Ajax. For, not content with all this, our hero did something else that was far more laughable. Coming down among the public, he seated himself among the senators, between two ex-consuls, who were very much afraid that he would seize one of them and drub him, taking him for a wether!

This is the only place in the dialogue where Lucian's Lycinus relates an actual episode from myth. Prior to this, he has touched briefly on all manner of myths beginning from the very formation of the universe, and from all the regions of Greece, and Rome and Eqypt. Why then this particular myth? True, it is used to criticize the dancer as going beyond the acceptable bounds of mimesis, and it is not the only criticism of pantomime Lycinus makes: he criticizes dancers with the wrong body type, and the dancing of myths out of chronology. But Ajax's madness is the only pantomimic episode described, and while on the one hand Lucian uses it to criticize the actor as going beyond bounds, on the other he suggests that it is evidence that the actor has himself gone mad. But it is a strange madness that conforms so closely to the myth and Sophocles' *Ajax*, and indeed the episode calls into question assertions made by Lucian elsewhere in the dialogue.

The conflict over the arms has been dramatized with two characters on stage: Odysseus and Ajax, contrary to what Lucian says elsewhere that the dancer is praised for playing multiple characters. Taking the realism further, the actor playing Ajax attacks the time keeper and the aulos player, suggesting an immediate violent response, and snatching the latter's instrument, breaks it over Odysseus' head. His actions are greeted by the common people in the audience as a license to act mad, seemingly supporting Lycinus' argument that the audience learned imitation from the action on stage, though this was inappropriate imitation, which the better educated should have disapproved of. To crown it all, the "mad" actor now comes down off the stage and seats himself next to two senators, who fear his beating them in mistake for castrated sheep, a clear reference to the Atreidai, who escaped such treatment at the hands of the Sophoclean Ajax. These actorly actions appear deliberate, made in awareness of the myth and unlikely to be mistaken by the educated audience, as surely by Lucian himself, and would account for the applause by this same section of the audience. This excess of actorly madness becomes then a showcase of both actorly technique involving the audience in a faithful depiction of the episode that *requires more than one actor*, and Lucian enjoying a learned joke, parading his knowledge of tragic myth and story.[53]

But the episode also suggests that the pantomime was not necessarily danced in the forms described by Lucian. For if there was a convention in the depiction of madness on stage, it was often not recognized as such or else veered into comedy, as told in Macrobius' *Saturnalia* in the early fifth century CE:

> cum in Herculem furentem prodisset et
> non nullis incessum histrioni convenientem non
> servare videretur, deposita persona ridentes
> increpuit: μωροί, μαινόμενον ὀρχοῦμαι. *Saturnalia* 2.7.16

[53] See also Webb 2008 for a different interpretation.

> When Pylades acted the part of the insane Hercules and some thought he wasn't maintaining the gait appropriate to an actor, he took his mask off and scolded the people who were laughing by saying, "Idiots! I'm dancing a madman!"[54]

This suggests that dancing madness was especially tricky and risked exceeding accepted norms for actorly behavior, often to the bafflement of the audience. Of course, the depiction of madness could also be taken as comic, and Heracles and Ajax were both buffoon figures as well as tragic characters.[55]

4.5 Rhetoric and the Progymnasmata

According to Lucian, dance had the dual functions of both bringing pleasure and teaching, with character formation a primary aim:

> ἐῶ λέγειν ὡς ἀμείνων τὸ ἦθος ὁμιλῶν τῇ τοιαύτῃ θέᾳ γενήσῃ, ὅταν ὁρᾷς[1] τὸ θέατρον μισοῦν μὲν τὰ κακῶς γιγνόμενα, ἐπιδακρῦον δὲ τοῖς ἀδικουμένοις, καὶ ὅλως τὰ ἤθη τῶν ὁρώντων παιδαγωγοῦν. *Dance* 72-3
>
> I forbear to mention that you will become better in character through familiarity with such a spectacle, when you see the assembly detesting misdeeds, weeping over victims of injustice, and in general schooling the characters of the individual spectators.

Thus the lover is cured by learning of the evils of love, the grief stricken leave with a brighter mood (*Dance* 79) and all learn to know themselves better (*Dance* 81). Pantomime's depiction of character also overlapped with the purposes of rhetoric:

> οὐ μὴν οὐδὲ ῥητορικῆς ἀφέστηκεν, ἀλλὰ καὶ ταύτης μετέχει, καθ᾽ ὅσον ἤθους τε καὶ πάθους ἐπιδεικτική ἐστιν, ὧν καὶ οἱ ῥήτορες γλίχονται. *Dance* 35

[54] Macrobius *Saturnalia* Loeb 2011.
[55] Pike 1980.

> From rhetoric, however, she has not held aloof, but has her part in that too, inasmuch as she is given to depicting character and emotion, of which the orators also are fond.

Training in rhetoric involved the use of progymnasmata or exercises:

> Ἡ δὲ πλείστη διατριβὴ καὶ ὁ σκοπὸς τῆς ὀρχηστικῆς ἡ ὑπόκρισίς ἐστιν, ὡς ἔφην, κατὰ τὰ αὐτὰ καὶ τοῖς ῥήτορσιν ἐπιτηδευομένη, καὶ μάλιστα τοῖς τὰς καλουμένας ταύτας μελέτας διεξιοῦσιν· οὐδὲν γοῦν καὶ ἐν ἐκείνοις μᾶλλον ἐπαινοῦμεν ἢ τὸ ἐοικέναι τοῖς ὑποκειμένοις προσώποις καὶ μὴ ἀπῳδὰ εἶναι τὰ λεγόμενα τῶν εἰσαγομένων ἀριστέων ἢ τυραννοκτόνων ἢ πενήτων ἢ γεωργῶν, ἀλλ᾽ ἐν ἑκάστῳ τούτων τὸ ἴδιον καὶ τὸ ἐξαίρετον δείκνυσθαι. *Dance* 65
>
> The chief occupation and the aim of dancing, as I have said, is impersonating, which is cultivated in the same way by the rhetoricians, particularly those who recite these pieces that they call "exercises"; for in their case also there is nothing which we commend more highly than their accommodating themselves to the roles which they assume, so that what they say is not inappropriate to the princes or tyrant-slayers or poor people or farmers whom they introduce, but in each of these what is individual and distinctive is presented.

We know that the rhetorical contest between Ajax and Ulysses had long been the topic of Roman *controversiae* and *suasoriae* in the training of orators (See Anon., *Rhetorica ad Herennium* 1.1.18 and Juvenal 7.115) This is probably why the contest occupies by far the longest section of Ovid's treatment of the story in *Metamorphoses* XIII.382-98. But full Progymnasmata have survived by Libanios, a great sophist of Antioch who was also extremely interested in and an admirer of pantomime dancing.[56] He wrote them during the second half of the fourth century CE.

[56] See his 64th *Oration* in defence of the dancers of Antioch who had been criticised by Aristides, a treatise which has received a translation and commentary by Margaret E. Molloy: *Libanius and the Dancers* 1996.

Ajax appears in a number of these as follows: compared with Achilles; when about to kill himself; on recovering from madness; and on losing the contest for the arms of Achilles. It is interesting that, apart from the first, the remaining exercises all relate to the events leading up to his suicide, and none from earlier episodes such as the embassy to Achilles, the moments before the duel with Hector or its aftermath, and the defence of the ships. While the inherent drama and conflict of the conflict, madness and suicide compared to the Homeric episodes, would have appealed to rhetoricians, they are also clearly shaped by tragedy. We are unable to trace influences of Aeschylus' plays, but the close resemblances to Sophocles' *Ajax* are clear. There is indeed, as Webb points out, "a precise intertextual relationship with Sophocles' *Ajax*, in addition to Homer's *Iliad*… Libanios' version shows a close knowledge of the text (knowledge that was presumably shared by the students in his school)."[57] An example occurs in "Speech in Character 6: what words would Ajax say after his madness?"[58] where echoes of Sophocles can be heard in "I regained my senses to become more unfortunate." (*Aj*. 257-62)

But it is the differences from Sophocles' version that are significant. Shame is declared the motive for the suicide, shame at his disgrace: when Ajax recovers from the madness, "he decided to die rather than endure the disgrace from his madness; for men who are noble and illustrious and superior to the masses are like that: if it becomes impossible for them to live with a noble demeanour, they consider death easy to bear."[59] The sentiment of the noble man choosing death when life is insupportable is certainly Sophoclean, but shame at his conduct was never a clearly expressed motive. After enumerating the lack of reasons for living, the speech concludes, "If it was necessary to find a noble solution for these troubles and a release from shame befitting a free man, he found it – not by waiting for the sword hand of a foe, but by proving self-sufficient in

[57] Webb 2010: 144.
[58] *Libanius' Progymnasmata* translated by Gibson 2008: 374-77.
[59] Ibid. 122-5.

death."[60] Self-sufficiency is a character trait that certainly belongs to Sophocles' Ajax, who denies the gods themselves, but self-sufficiency in carrying out his own death is here expressed as an essential noble trait for which Ajax is praised.

Accordingly, while "Speech in Character 5: what words would Ajax say when he is about to kill himself?"[61] is modelled closely on Sophocles' version, the differences are significant. A new reason is introduced for anger at the denial of the arms: "But by the rights of kinship, who should have received the arms? But now the first cousin of Achilles is dishonoured, while a man completely unrelated to him has been decorated." The purported cousinship does not figure in Homer or in Sophocles and is presumably a Hellenistic development. Again, shame is the main motive for the suicide: "I have lived my life with glory, and I cannot bear the current shame; for the good must either live in good repute, or be dead. For may I no longer see the Greeks, not even if they were going to spare me, nor may I give myself to the enemy on their behalf. I am ashamed at what I have accomplished, and I cannot sail home. The future is unbearable. I am the son of Telamon, who utterly destroyed this city, and who brought prizes for his valor back to Salamis. And so, it would be more terrible than many deaths to speak to him and tell him what has happened to me. Let anyone who wishes trample on me as I lie dead."

There is no revenge curse: this missing element is significant. Revenge is excised since the passion involved in speaking a curse on enemies would sit uneasily on the rational, rhetorical elements of the speech, which except for the opening words, is all reason. As befitting an exercise in delineating character, it rationalizes in words and excels in reason, in a manner suggesting that, in the light of the research findings discussed in Chapter Three, if Ajax spoke in this manner he would not have proceeded to kill himself! There is none of the psychological pressure, the constriction of thought, the

[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid. 370-3.

raw emotions of one *in extremis*, that Sophocles' eponymous hero embodies. Of course a theatrical depiction of suffering through song, speech and action that excites compassion and awe in the viewer will not be expressed in the same manner in a rhetorical speech and it is a matter of conjecture if Aeschylus did so portray his Ajax in order to form the examples that the progymnasmata are modelled on.

The reception of tragedy in the progymnasmata, through its selective modelling of tragic characters, remained part of academic training and oratory throughout antiquity,[62] and helped preserve the mythical and tragic figure of Sophocles' Ajax even as his distinctive character depictions underwent changes that emphasized nobility and self-sufficiency in death, while losing its psychological depths.

4.6 Augustine and Christianity's Prohibition of Suicide

As discussed in Chapter One fifth-century Greek attitudes were mixed but generally tolerant of suicide, often excusing it by reference to individual response to pain, suffering and crises of life. Thus while Socrates condemns suicide in *Phaedo* 61c, the Athenian in Plato's *Laws* 9, 873c excuses it if imposed by the state, compelled by intolerable or inevitable misfortune or beyond remedy or endurance, but not if stemming from sloth or unmanly cowardice. Aristotle termed cowardice those acts of suicide to escape from poverty, the troubles of life or from pain or sorrow: *Eth. Nic.* 1116a. While Plato appears to base his argument that the suicide is robbing Fate, Aristotle regarded it as an injury to the *polis*, hence the state is entitled to impose penalties: *Eth. Nic.* 1138a5-14. With the passing of the *polis* and advent of the Hellenistic kingdoms, the individual inhabited a wider cosmopolis, where a plurality of views on suicide continued until supplanted by Christianity.[63] Early Christianity was not itself critical of suicide, praising virgins who

[62] Penella 2010.
[63] Van Hooff 1990: 181-97. See also Minois 1999 Chapter Three.

chose death and martyrs who went willingly to their deaths under pagan persecution. However with the conversion of Constantine and the official recognition of Christianity, uneasiness with suicide in Christian thought solidified. Augustine's condemnation of suicide in *The City of God Against the Pagans* was carefully argued on the basis that the fifth commandment that made killing another a crime should extend to killing oneself, while suicide to escape suffering was unchristian and only god could ordain the time of death:

> de homine intellegamus, quod dictum est, Non occides, nec alterum ergo nec te. Neque enim qui se occidit aliud quam hominem occidit. Book 1 XX:[64]
> … to understand this commandment, "Thou shalt not kill," as meaning man alone, that is, "neither another nor thyself," for in fact he who kills himself kills what is no other than a man.

Exceptions were made for cases where killing is justified and for biblical figures, saints and martyrs who were excused for that they killed themselves on God's command, but the conclusion is:

> his igitur exceptis, quos vel lex iusta generaliter vel ipse fons iustitiae Deus specialiter occidi iubet, quisquis hominem vel se ipsum vel quemlibet occiderit, homicidii crimine innectitur. Book 1 XXI
>
> With these exceptions then, those slain either by application of a just law or by command of God, the very fount of justice, whoever kills a human being, either himself or no matter who, falls within the meshes of the charge of murder.

Augustine carefully distinguishes the famous classical suicides: Lucretia, he says ought not to have killed herself since the outrage was to her body while she remained chaste in thought, and Cato he dismisses as being inconsistent in desiring death for himself but

[64] Translations from Augustine *The City of God against the Pagans* Loeb Volume 1 Books 1-3.

counselling his son to live and throw himself on the mercy of Caesar.[65] Augustine also criticizes as weakness those who are unable to bear hardships, reminding his audience that the church fathers were not permitted to escape persecution through suicide, concluding:

> manifestum est hoc non licere colentibus unum verum Deum Book 1 XXII
> it is obvious that suicide is unlawful for those who worship the one true God.

Accordingly, he is impatient with Hercules' self-immolation on Mt Oeta:[66]

> cum ea virtute qua multa subegerat, morbum tamen, quo languebat, sustinere non posset.
>
> For the courage whereby he had often prevailed did not suffice him to withstand suffering that laid him low.

In the following centuries, Augustine's teachings were adopted by the Church, through the councils of Braga in 563 and Auxerre 578, and became established church doctrine for the next millennium and a half, enshrined in civil laws by Charlemagne and the Carolingian kings.[67] Later in the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas added other reasons to Augustine's, partly drawing on Aristotle's disapproval of suicide as an attack on the community (*Nic. Eth.* 1138a5–14): suicide, for Aquinas, was contrary to charity, and to natural law; it wronged society; and since life was a gift of God, suicide was a sin against God. In time, all Christian denominations (Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant) came to

[65] Ibid. Book 1 XXIII
[66] Augustine *The City of God against the Pagans* Loeb Volume V Books 16-18.35 Harvard 1965 translated by Eva Stanford at Book XXVIII.
[67] Barbagli 2015: 40-6.

condemn suicide, with harsh penalties on the burial of suicides and treatment of their property.[68]

Not only ethics, but beliefs regarding suicide, changed with Christianity.[69] Emotions and evil thoughts became the work of demons sent to tempt the person into sin, with suicide attributed to three of the negative emotions: anger, sloth and sadness. Sadness by itself was not sinful but where it led to despair and suicide, it was the opposite of faith in god. The sense of despair that forgot God's grace and doubted of God's forgiveness was caused by the devil's temptation, and the believer should seek help through confession or otherwise guard against demonic possession. This system of beliefs accompanied and reinforced the Christian prohibition against suicide up to the early modern period.

4.7 Selective Appropriations

But even as views on suicide changed, the plays continued to be studied and annotated, especially the *Ajax*, as noted above. Part of their appeal may have been the perception of Sophocles as the most perfect of poets, midway between Aeschylus and Euripides, a reputation that began soon after the poet's death, was reinforced by Aristotle's *Poetics*, and continued into later times. The sweetness of his verse, its harmony in style and metre, was admired throughout the Byzantine and Medieval periods.[70] Thus a rhetorical exercise on *Ajax* 522 draws praises for the grace of the verse by the Byzantine scholar Nicephorus who concludes that Sophocles exemplifies the very wisdom suggested in his name, "becoming for the tragedians what Homer had been for (epic) poets".[71] There is a strong moral component to these opinions: both Homer and Sophocles have become teachers of

[68] Ibid. Barbagli describes in detail the application of laws in medieval and early modern Europe: chapters 1-3.
[69] Ibid. 49-58.
[70] Magnelli 2017: 14.
[71] Ibid. 14-15.

virtue. We saw how the progymnasmata portrayed Ajax's nobility and self-sufficiency as admirable character traits.

The study of the plays would have been limited to the circle of the elite, those who could read and write, the same elite which continued with "the familiar assumptions about ethical values that seem to underlie the whole educational theory and practice of antiquity from the Hellenistic period onwards, including the belief that the poetry of the past has something comprehensively useful to teach, which can be systematically studied and imitated. This 'usefulness' of course has a strong moral basis,"[72] with Athena's speech at *Ajax* 118-21 "described as 'instructive', designed to be a warning to both Odysseus and the spectator."[73]

Collections of famous sayings were also included in Christian sacred texts, as some early church fathers were in favour of appropriating parts of the classical heritage instead of rejecting it wholesale. Selective quotation took place: John of Stobi (Stobaeus)'s influential *Greek Anthology*, in the fifth century CE included the last eight lines of Ajax's first long speech (430-80) ending "either live nobly or die nobly" quoted twice – once under "manliness" (3.7.2) and once under "comparison of life and death" (4.53.22), becoming "detachable and re-interpretable…less ambiguous and less of a challenge" when taken out of their dramatic setting.[74] We earlier saw the emphasis on nobility and self-sufficiency in death in the progymnasmata, and we encounter them here and in several of the Sepulchral Epigrams in the *Greek Anthology*[75] dedicated to the purported tomb of Ajax at Rhoeteum in the Troad.

The tomb of Ajax, or Aianteion, was already recognised by 375 BCE, when an Athenian inscription honours "the soldiers who were allies at Aianteion on the

[72] Easterling 2006b: 25.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Easterling 2003: 327.
[75] *The Greek Anthology*, Loeb Classical Library Harvard *Volume II: Book 7: Sepulchral Epigrams.*

Hellespont" (*Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* 19.204 fr. b.2-3) and became a famous tourist visiting-place in antiquity, especially after the Emperor Hadrian had it renovated.[76] The emotional resonances of the hero's lonely suicide must have been part of the attraction. Catullus uses its melancholic associations in poem 65 when lamenting the death and unmarked grave of his brother somewhere near Rhoeteum. Strabo (13.1.30) tells that Antony stole the statue of Ajax from his burial mound there to give to Cleopatra, but that Augustus had later restored it to the Rhoeteans. Pausanias reports that a local man had told him that when the sea washed away the entrance to the tomb, the bones of an enormous man had been found inside; he also says he was informed by the Aeolians that after Odysseus had been shipwrecked the armour of Achilles was cast ashore near the grave of Ajax (1.35.3). This motif of the arms seeking Ajax echoes the charge of injustice that Pindar writes about but which Sophocles left unanswered. Plato continues the charge when he has Socrates welcome entering Hades with the expectation of meeting Palamedes and Ajax and others who died owing to unjust judgments: *Apology* 40e-41c.

This motif appears in Epigrams 145 and 146 which speak in the voice of Virtue sitting by the tomb and mourning that cunning Fraud had prevailed with the Greeks, with 146 ending,

> τεύχεα δ᾽ ἂν λέξειεν Ἀχιλλέος· "Ἄρσενος ἀκμᾶς,
> οὐ σκολιῶν μύθων ἄμμες ἐφιέμεθα."

> Achilles' arms would fain cry, "We want no crooked words, but manly valour."

Epigram 147 extols the courage of Ajax in the defence of the ships, concluding with the motif of the self-sufficient hero who is conquered only by himself:

[76] Cook 1973: 88-9.

εἰ δέ σε μὴ τεύχεσσιν Ἀχιλλέος ὥπλισεν Ἑλλάς,
ἄξιον ἀντ᾽ ἀρετᾶς ὅπλα ποροῦσα γέρας,
Μοιράων βουλῇσι τάδ᾽ ἥμπλακεν, ὡς ἂν ὑπ᾽ ἐχθρῶν
μή τινος, ἀλλὰ σὺ σῇ πότμον ἕλῃς παλάμῃ.

If Hellas did not give thee the arms of Achilles to wear, a worthy reward of thy valour, it was by the counsel of the Fates that she erred, in order that thou shouldst meet with doom from no foe, but at thine own hand.

Epigrams 148 and 149 make the same praise with 149 saying:

Κεῖται ἐνὶ Τροίῃ Τελαμώνιος, οὔ τινι δ᾽ ἔμπης
ἀντιβίων ὀπάσας εὖχος ἑοῦ θανάτου·
τόσσης γὰρ χρόνος ἄλλον ἐπάξιον ἀνέρα τόλμης
οὐχ εὑρών, παλάμῃ θῆκεν ὑπ᾽ αὐτοφόνῳ.

The Telamonian lies low in Troy, but he gave no foeman cause to boast of his death. For Time finding no other man worthy of such a deed entrusted it to his own self-slaying hand.

Epigrams 151 and 152 are directly based on Sophocles, repeating Teucer's lamentation on how the gifts exchanged between Ajax and Hector were instruments of their deaths. The only epigram that is mildly critical is 150, echoing Sophocles' conversion of friends into foes and vice versa:

Αἴας ἐν Τροίῃ μετὰ μυρίον εὖχος ἀέθλων
μέμφεται οὐκ ἐχθροῖς κείμενος, ἀλλὰ φίλοις.
Ajax lieth in Troy after a thousand vaunted deeds of prowess, blaming not his foes but his friends.

4.8 From Antiquity to the Middle Ages and Renaissance

Philostratus (approximately first to second century CE) in his *Heroicus* 35 describes Ajax as the close companion of Achilles and has Trojans as judges in the contest of the arms; Ajax goes insane and kills himself but is buried because Calchas advises that it was unholy to cremate suicides. Quintus Smyrnaeus' *Posthomerica*, written between the mid-second and late fourth centuries CE also has Trojan prisoners form the jury to adjudicate the claim to the arms, keeps the madness arising from the loss followed immediately by the suicide when Ajax regains his sanity: V.485-86. Around the same period or a little later, Dictys of Crete's *The Trojan War* was a source of many of the versions of the Trojan War in the Middle Ages but drastically changes key elements of the myth: Troy has fallen with the help of Ajax, the contention is not over the arms of Achilles but the palladium stolen from Troy, and the contest is between Ulysses and Diomedes on the one hand and Ajax on the other. The army favours Ajax, but the Greek leaders give it to Ulysses with the result that the army splits into pro-Ajax and pro-Ulysses factions:

> "Ajax was so angry that he lost control of himself and openly swore to kill those who had thwarted his claim... At daybreak we found Ajax, out in the open, dead; upon closer investigation, we discovered that he had been killed with a sword. A great tumult arose among our leaders and men, and soon a full-grown rebellion was under way. We felt that just as Palamedes, our wisest counsellor in war and peace, had been treacherously slain, so now Ajax, our most distinguished commander, had met a similar end."[77]

Ajax suffers no madness, and only threatens the commanders; murder, not suicide, is implied and the reference to Palamedes points to Ulysses as the culprit. Neoptolemus cremates the body in accordance with epic practice without controversy and raises a monument to Ajax at Rhoeteum. There follows a three day funeral for Ajax and the anger

[77] Dictys of Crete's *The Trojan War. The Chronicles of Dictys of Crete and Dares the Phrygian.*

against the Greek commanders is such that the kings have to beg to be allowed to leave. Ulysses is pursued and his ships wrecked by the vengeance of Telamon, not Poseidon.

Variations continue to be made of the myth in the early modern period. Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* based on medieval sources of the tale of Troilus and Cressid breaks almost entirely with the heroic epic tradition. His narrators are Odysseus and Thersites, and the latter's comment may stand as a prism through which the events of the play are refracted: "All the argument is a whore and a cuckold – a good quarrel to draw emulous factions and bleed to death upon...War and lechery confound all." (2.3.69-72) Ajax is a blockhead and a fool, mocked as an elephant and a lubber for his enormous size, envious of Achilles and is made cousin to Hector, thereby identified with both Greeks and Trojans. His rivalry with Achilles is manipulated by Odysseus in an attempt to rouse the latter to action. Achilles' withdrawal from battle is variously ascribed to the cowardice of Patroclus and to Achilles' love for Polyxena. Being out of practice, he is unable to sustain battle with Hector who courteously allows him to escape unhurt only for Achilles to set the Myrmidons on to slaughter Hector. The action ending at this point, there is no mention of the arms or suicide and no foreshadowing of either.

This portrayal of Ajax may owe something to the Christian re-interpretations of Aristotle's *Poetics* that looked at the plays as actions flowing from the vices and faults of the protagonists. In particular Philip Melanchthon was instrumental in the Christianization of tragedy. In his manifesto of 1545 entitled *Cohortatio ad legendas tragoedias et comedias* he proposed that the tragic hero was punished for crimes stemming from his vices, passions and character flaws, becoming a warning to the spectators or readers to abide by the laws of God. "Scholarship was given its missionary purpose, and interpretation of Greek tragedy became a tool in the service of theodicy."[78]

[78] Lurie 2012: 443.

In a series of lectures Melanchthon sought to apply these principles to the plays of Sophocles. Thus "Melanchthon understood Ajax as a conflict between Ulysses as a modest and self-restrained politician and Ajax as a burly soldier who was driven by ambition, spite, and a fatal inability to tolerate an offence and who brought about his own downfall as a result of these vices."[79] In such an interpretation, the ambiguous, ambivalent treatment of suicide has no place.

About sixty years later, James Shirley's masque *The Contention of Ajax and Ulysses for the Armour of Achilles* was performed 1654-58 and published in 1659. Very much a comedy, this begins with the pages of Ajax and Ulysses contending, and descends into farce. A sleeping Thersander mistakes each speaker for the other and at the judgment suggests the arms be divided, the headpiece going to Ulysses and the rest to Ajax. In his madness, Ajax strikes a politician called Polybrontes dead, mistaking him for Agamemnon and mistakes Calchas for Ulysses. Calchas announces that the gods will restore the arms to Ajax by ensuring that a storm places them on his tomb. This motif had appeared in Pausanias and the epigrams but here the prophecy of posthumous justice becomes the impulse to suicide:

> "I thank 'em, they are pleas'd, when I am dead
> To make a restitution to my fame,
> And send me home the armour, this is something,
> I'll make my self in a capacity
> By death to be an object of their justice,
> I'll dye immediately, I can do't my self."

This perverse and near-comic reason for suicide is strongly condemned by a shocked Calchas:

> "Your Piety avert so black a deed!
> This is a way to make the world suspect

[79] Ibid. 444.

The worth of all your former actions,
And that they were not births Legitimate,
Born from true honour, but the spurious issue
Of an unguided heat, or chance: How shall
We think, that man is truly valiant,
And fit to be engag'd in things of fright
And danger, that wants courage to sustain
An injury."

Calchas here expresses a very different concept of honour from that of antiquity: the impious act of suicide will put Ajax's honour at risk and challenge all his prior achievements, converting them into matters of luck or chance. He will also stand accused of cowardice. But Ajax is firm:

"Go tell the world I am dead, and make it known,
That Ajax fell by no hand but his own."

The well-known and oft-quoted funeral dirge that follows spoken by Calchas beginning "The glories of our blood and state" is untethered from what has gone before: unconnected to the death by suicide or the life and career of Ajax, and with a solemnity at odds with the earlier comic aspects, the poem speaks of the inevitability of death and the fragility of human life. Like the ancient scholiasts and the Christian fathers, the tale of Ajax is made an occasion for pious reflections outside the context of what has gone before.

4.9 Postscript

Pat Easterling suggests that plays are examined to see how they entered the bloodstream of the culture, shaping cultural norms and being shaped by them in turn, with

serviceability or multi-functionality as possible reasons for any longevity.[80] In this regard I have suggested that the expressive emotionality and physicality of Sophocles' hero rendered him an ideal candidate for stage revivals, new adaptations of Sophocles' canonical drama, influence on and appearance in the genres of Hellenistic and Roman poetry, solo singing, pantomime, and exercises in rhetoric. The later literary tradition saw the eponymous hero becoming an exemplar of nobility in his choice of an honourable death over a dishonourable life and praised as a conqueror of self by his voluntary death.

The *Ajax* then continued to engage emotions and sympathies long after the fifth century BCE socio-cultural context had lapsed. As we have seen, the literary traditions and ancient commentaries emphasized the relevance of emotion and character. Easterling quotes the little poem that appears at the end of the manuscript Laurentianus 32.9, f.117v (329):

> "Sophocles, you won great fame among the wise,
> For by composing the lamentations of others
> You made us all sorrowful."[81]

Presumably composed in late antiquity, these verses sum up the appeal of Sophocles: his wisdom as well as the power to move his audience. Since tragedy focuses on suffering and its potential to evoke empathy in its spectators and readers Easterling suggests that this "may have been one reason why it could speak urgently to Christian readers for whom the notion of the contemplation of suffering was central to their spirituality."[82] The suffering of a Philoctetes or Oedipus perhaps but would the specific suicidal crisis in *Ajax* have spoken to a medieval audience steeped in Christian condemnation of suicide? Extracts of the play were appropriated for specific purposes, as we saw above, but I agree

[80] Easterling 2006a:2-3.
[81] Quoted in Easterling 2003: 329.
[82] Ibid. 329-30.

with Pietropaolo that medieval culture in general had no positive use for the psychology of despair: "Despair was a terrible sin against the goodness of God and an outright rejection of the economy of salvation.…despair denies the very foundations of Christian thought, namely the transcendence and love of God. Its gravest consequence is suicide, from which it is virtually inseparable…Medieval theology is not moved by either despair or suicide and sees no artistic potential in them, other than in an aesthetics designed to condemn them both."[83]

Christian views on suicide may have affected the play's relative lack of popularity after the Medieval period and the Renaissance. Even in the post-Christian world, attitudes to suicide remain infused with ideas of sin and guilt. In the following chapters, I study the performance implications of Sophocles' working of the suicide motif in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and the other ways in which this Sophoclean work has been interpreted and performed, why and for what purposes.

[83]Pietropaolo 2010: 406-7.

Chapter 5

Peter Sellars' *Ajax:* 'Blowing Open Theatre'

5.1 The Cambridge Greek *Ajax* 1882

Sophocles' *Ajax* is one of the least performed plays by Sophocles in the past 170 years. The APGRD database lists only sixty-five productions in this period, many of them school and college performances.[1] This contrasts with hundreds of productions of, for example, Sophocles' *Antigone* or Euripides' *Medea.* A college performance in ancient Greek in Cambridge in 1882 marks the modern reception of Sophocles' *Ajax* in the Anglophone world and inaugurated the custom of the Greek play at Cambridge. Performed by an all-male ensemble over four days in November and December, the play may have been chosen for the dearth of female parts, even if the *Philoctetes* would have been a better choice if this had been the sole criterion. Except for the all-male actors, other ancient Greek theatrical conventions such as the three-actor rule, doubling of roles, use of masks, and singing, were not adopted. The chorus of fifteen chanted, and the actors spoke their roles, or rather declaimed them.[2]

Put in context, the performance of ancient plays in Greek in Cambridge was inaugurated against a backdrop of college theatricals, revivals of other Greek plays (particularly in 1880 of *Agamemnon* in Greek at Oxford and the Harvard *Oedipus Tyrannus* in 1881[3]) and accompanied by intense interest in Hellenism.[4] Performance also signalled a movement away from purely philological interests, spearheaded by individuals with interests outside of the narrowly philological, as described by Easterling.[5] These broader interests constituted attempted duplication of architectural

[1] Accessed on 12th July 2018.
[2] See full details in Morwood 2008: 83-88.
[3] On which see Macintosh 2006: 140, 150-1 and Norman 1881.
[4] Easterling 1999.
[5] Ibid.

elements in the staging and costumes, with particular care being taken with these, and music used to create mood.

Architectural elements included a *thymele* modelled on the theatre of Dionysos in Athens, and bronze doors flanking the stage with steps down to the orchestra, which would hardly have been an accurate depiction of the tent of Ajax before which the action unfolds. The quest for architectural verisimilitude seemed then to reflect wider research findings rather than the play's elements.[6]

The production was deemed a success for a variety of reasons, as recorded in the reviews of the play.[7] For the reviewer in the *Daily Telegraph* this was "Undoubtedly a difficult play to represent" and he praised the actor playing Tecmessa and scenes of pathos generally.[8] *The Athenaeum's* critic[9] praised the music and the stature and voice of the actor playing Ajax,[10] and opined that performance brought out the theatrical force of the play. *Vanity Fair's* reviewer criticised the pronunciation and delivery generally, suggesting that the lines be pronounced with passion rather than with attention solely to metre.[11] *The Times* proposed that the performance was the "test of a real play" which brought out the "spirit which inspires the language" which is usually studied for itself.[12] In general then the performance conveyed a somatic power, going beyond text to spoken word, gesture and movement. We shall see that physicality and voice of the lead actor are instrumental in conveying the power of the role in modern productions as much as they did in the ancient context.

The play's performance produced excitement even among academics. Jebb, whose English prose translation was used in the programme, was moved to write: "The

[6] *Cambridge Daily News* in Morwood 2008: 84. See also the sketches in Farren 1883.
[7] Copies of reviews can be found in the APGRD archives at the University of Cambridge.
[8] *Daily Telegraph* 30 November 1882.
[9] *The Athenaeum* 9 December 1882.
[10] Praised also by the critic in *Pall Mall* 4 December 1882.
[11] *Vanity Fair* 9 December 1882.
[12] *The Times* 28 November 1882.

performance seemed to me very beautiful and very impressive. I felt that I had never understood the play before."[13] The Cambridge *Ajax* was to him: "a new revelation of meaning and power".[14]

The unqualified success of the play contributed to the continued adoption of such revivals, creating a tradition in Cambridge that persists through the present day and inaugurating the history of performances of Sophocles' *Ajax* in the modern era.

5.2 Peter Sellars' production of the *Ajax*

It was not, however, until the breakthrough in performances of ancient Greek tragedy in ways which radically updated them to speak to contemporary concerns, a breakthrough usually dated to the late 1960s,[15] that the minute exploration of the psychological portrait painted in *Ajax* was to become possible. The remainder of this chapter is a study of the 1986 production of *Ajax*, directed by Peter Sellars and based on an adaptation of Sophocles' *Ajax* by Robert Auletta. This was performed under the auspices of the American National Theater at the Kennedy Center at Washington D.C. from 2 June 1986, and also at the La Jolla Playhouse in Los Angeles. The production went on tour to Europe in 1987 premiering in Brussels on 23 May 1987 with a slightly different cast.

This production was a significant re-working of Sophocles, and constituted, in my view, *the* most significant attempt to stage the ancient play of the late 20th century. I will argue that its effectiveness was not only a result of its avant-garde aesthetics and thoroughgoing retopicalisation to address late-twentieth century American militarism, but its fidelity to the sensitive portrayal of the suicidal crisis in Sophocles' original play. Since video copies of the production are rare and inaccessible, and I believe it to be a crucial

[13] Letter to E. B. Cowell quoted in Easterling 1999: 33 n. 19.
[14] *OT* ed. and tr. Jebb Introduction p. li.
[15] Hall, Macintosh and Wrigley 2004.

step in the Performance Reception of *Ajax*, a detailed account of the production incorporating visual and sensory elements in addition to text—what in Theatre Studies is called a 'thick description'—is, I believe, a valuable addition to the available research materials on this play. My method will therefore include both comparative analysis of the texts and a detailed discussion of production and directorial choices, while maintaining that the over-arching interest remains the portrayal of a tragic and arguably avoidable suicide. A particular focus will be the series of dissonances and incongruities thrown up by those choices which help to answer the following questions: how important psychologically is this production in the reception history of Sophocles' *Ajax*? How did it treat the ancient meanings of the text, in particular the suicide? How did this adaptation speak to ideas about manhood, militarism and suicide in its own times?

5.3 Performance and textual analysis

The text of a performance exists as an artefact in itself, one that rewards analysis in comparison with its ancient forbear. This can be done even if it is agreed that the text of Sophocles' *Ajax* is capable of bearing more than one meaning and is marked by the socio-political-cultural ethos, contradictions and complexities of its time. Changes of emphases, additions and omissions are pointers to ideological shifts, contingent concerns and different intents and goals even though the totality of meanings is generated in and through performance.[16]

A careful study of the text, which Robert Auletta deliberately states is "adapted from Sophocles", reveals where Sophocles has been followed and where Auletta has deviated from the ancient text. All quotations are from the 1986 text published in *Theater* magazine.[17] The following comments are also based on a viewing of a video recording of

[16] Fischer-Lichte 2010: 35.
[17] Auletta *Ajax* 1986.

the play on 8th November 2013.[18] This is a version performed in the Netherlands as part of the European tour in 1987, with a slightly different cast from the American production. The performance admirably fuses the words with song, music, staging, and props, and will be discussed as a composite.

The audience is told, "The place is America. The time, the very near future." Sophocles is being updated to the immediate future and the play is therefore taking place in an open, timeless present. This reference to the *future* is an incongruity or dissonance, the first of many in this production, and one that plays on the fiction of theatre, with its openness to the possibility of change occurring in the *present*.[19] In a later talk,[20] Sellars describes how he takes inspiration from Greek statuary, which combined meticulous realism and extraordinary idealization, expressing the sense of reaching beyond what exists to something that does not yet exist. His ideal of the theatre is a radical one: the possibility of enacting change through live performance. Athenian tragedy possessed that radical function through its continuing re-imagination and re-visioning of myth, even while tragedy eschewed the contemporary specificity of politicization and focus of Old Comedy. Sellars is announcing his re-visioning of that ancient tragic vision, pushing contingency in the direction of radical change, forcing a re-looking at the past and the present and the need to engage actively with the future.

However, the openness to time is not matched in that of location: the play takes place at a very precise location: the exterior back wall of the Pentagon is displayed on the back wall of the performance space and images of the Pentagon appear on video monitors mounted on the stage. This is America, and we are in the heart of its military control centre. But it is not the front of the Pentagon that is depicted, but the loading docks at the

[18] At the APGRD in Oxford. Further comments are drawn from King 1986, a dramaturgy of the Washington production.
[19] Hall 2010: 25.
[20] Sellars 2003.

back where the garbage is taken out.[21] On a steeply raked stage is a courtroom setting, discussed below. To one side is a large box, draped with cloth. On the other side of the stage there is a video monitor showing various images of the Pentagon. The preamble continues: "America has just won a great victory in Latin America", after "a long and bloody war" which saw "the forces of the left decisively beaten" but in which "bitter competitiveness" reigned "among factions of the armed forces and "a deep animosity" occurred among some of the generals.

Sophocles' characters have been retained in full: Athena, Ajax, Odysseus, the Chorus of Ajax's men, Tecmessa, Ajax's son (here renamed Acere), a Messenger, Teucer, Menelaus and Agamemnon. Ajax, Odysseus, Menelaus and Agamemnon are now generals in the American Army, Tecmessa is a Latina, from a nation conquered by the Americans. But in another discordant note, for its times, the cast is multi-racial: the actor playing Athena, Aleta Mitchell, is black, as are three of the five chorus members, two of whom also take on the roles of Odysseus and Agamemnon. The chorus member playing Teucer, and the actor playing Tecmessa, are Asian. Ajax is white, as is the fifth chorus member, who later plays Menelaus. We shall see how the racial profiles of the cast expand on themes of belonging and estrangement, of identity and meaning.

The chorus members conspicuously play multiple roles, both in forming the chorus, then individuals among them become Odysseus, the Messenger, Teucer, Menelaus and Agamemnon. More significantly, they each take turns to voice the speech of Ajax himself, as the actor playing Ajax, Howie Seago, is deaf and signs using American Sign Language developed by the National Theatre for the Deaf. Seago's signing was a deliberate choice, given that Seago is able to speak orally, and not only in sign language,[22] and at one crucial point in the play, speaks in his own voice. This choice

[21] Sellars 1989: 94.
[22] Dinitia Smith 1998.

of a deaf actor as the protagonist signing his lines which are spoken by others on his behalf creates a series of incongruities and dissonances as we shall see.

The staging also contained a number of framing devices that act to create incongruities. The first is the courtroom setting of the action: this explores and develops the reference to the votes on the award of the arms of Achilles that in Sophocles took place *before* the play opens. Using this setting to frame the action of the play while retaining Sophocles' text creates a dissonance between word and stage from the start. The audience is forced to question the significance of the staging for the action. Is this a trial? A court martial? An inquest, especially in the second half? A court officer is present, taking down notes, shuffling papers, and once even attempts to intervene in the action. There is a presiding judge (Athena), a witness box, tables for prosecution and defence, and a section for the jury, used by the chorus. Ajax is on trial but is he the only one? This courtroom framing continually raises questions of truth-telling, oath-taking, interrogation, and speech-making; with any and all verdicts left open at the end.

Related to this is the fact that all the characters, except Ajax, speak into microphones as if testifying; Howie Seago's Ajax is the only character who does not, since he signs, but his lines are vocalized by the other actors speaking into microphones. The use of microphones appears to adopt a form of naturalism that belongs more to film than to stage since there is no need for the actors to throw their voices: they speak or sing normally. Sellars has spoken of using the microphone as a mask: "I felt a microphone was very important for the masks; I replaced masks with microphones, because the microphone is an amplifier, but also a cover. It enlarges the human figure, but it also creates distance and also is deceptive. It is the mask of our society as it were."[23] The microphones amplified the voices and at the same time, almost disembodied the speakers. King points out that the digital delay system created different effects: "of a voice in a

[23] Sellars 1989: 93.

cavern or a shoebox, over water or under the breath, so that the performances were always psycho-acoustically enhanced."[24]

Another framing device is Athena who, unlike in Sophocles, is present onstage from beginning almost to the end, and shapes the drama in significant ways; advising, directing, controlling, she presides over the courtroom, wielding the gavel furiously at one point. Her expressions and actions are often emphasized, especially in close-ups in the play's recording.

A description of the action follows. In the prologue, Athena approaches a seated Odysseus who is rifling through papers on his table, searching feverishly among them. Both speak through microphones. Odysseus is on the track of a killer of cattle, and Athena confirms this was Ajax. The exchange is updated with modern references, for example, Athena praises Odysseus' stealth with "No CIA man could be better fitted for the job." The purpose for Ajax's rage has not been changed: denial of the arms of Achilles and their award to Odysseus, an anachronism which evokes ancient echoes.

The sense of a triumphant, gloating Athena is retained: she describes in detail how she deludes Ajax into believing that the cattle, sheep, dogs are actually his enemies; she explains "I threw a net of fantasy in front of him, and he walked into it, deep with his boots and his mind…Then he waded into them, demented, foaming at the face, hacking his enemies, leaders and followers alike, to pieces. Good, I said, General, good! Don't let a single one escape. Offer no mercy. Let them feel the muscle of a true American hero."

This Athena may or may not be an Olympian goddess (her nature is revealed in the course of the play) but her physically tangible presence is very much that of a flesh-and-blood woman, distinctly flaunting her sexuality. There is a seductive quality to Athena's interaction with Odysseus: dressed in a slinky, silver gown, she drapes herself across the table when speaking to Odysseus. Throughout the play there is a sense of sexual

[24] King 1986: 10.

competitiveness in the triangle between Athena, Odysseus and Ajax, developing and extending the tripartite positioning at the very outset of Sophocles' *Ajax*. Sexuality and sexual outrage are part of the additional elements introduced into that quality of excess that is expressed in and through Ajax, as we shall see later.

As in Sophocles, Odysseus is reluctant to face a maddened Ajax and is mocked by Athena. "There's nothing the gods can't, or won't, do" says Odysseus, echoing Sophocles, even as he fears confronting his enemy. At that point, the cloth over the box is pulled away and the maddened Ajax is revealed, ankle deep in blood. The image is shocking and visceral. A big man, Howie Seago dominates with his presence. But in this his first appearance, his maddened laughter and signing presence, amidst the sloshing of blood, are heard and seen through the clear walls of the glass box in which he is contained. This, and the speaking voice coming from outside the box (the chorus leader is speaking his lines), make a metaphor of the danger and daring of madness, a danger and daring that needs to be covered over and contained. It serves to isolate the mad and keep the danger away from the spectators. But the very transparency of the box threatens with the possibility of release. The audience is pushed into the position of Odysseus and is able to empathize with his fear and horror.

The dialogue here is similar to Sophocles, with Ajax declaring satisfaction with his revenge and avoidance of mockery: "They'll never have another chance to laugh and scheme behind my back and take what is rightfully mine." He insists on his right to torment Odysseus against the plea of Athena, justifying it by declaring that he had been tormented in his mind, mentally tortured, by the actions of the generals.

The aftermath of this theatrical and directorial revelation echoes Sophocles: Athena says to Odysseus: "Now you see the power of the gods. One day he was the greatest of the generals: in the heat of it all, the calmest judgment, the coolest head." Odysseus responds that Ajax had been utterly his own man, the implication being he is

now a plaything of the gods. Yet he empathizes: “He was my enemy, but I see him now and it makes me sick. It could be myself there, behind those mad eyes, those delusions.”

In an expansion from Sophocles, Athena’s injunction to practice moderation is expanded into a polemic against military interventionism: “Who do you think you are, filled to the red bursting with pride, wilfulness, and your superabundant egos? You think you can glide your war toys anywhere you please; that you can make the earth quake at will…What is left of humility, discretion, moderation?” Odysseus protests: “The world is ruthless, Athena.” “Not as ruthless as you are. In one day the balance of human life is thrown, the scales are tipped, and your story is over.” Here military adventurism is equated to the madness of Ajax; more, the lack of moderation with which Ajax has been accused is now attributed to the generals, who are forever formulating war and whose fate is compared with his: “One day at a time is all you have. So be careful.”

Odysseus leaves, and the play proper begins. Athena takes the chair as presiding judge and the chorus enters; five soldiers in battle fatigues, they take up positions on the jury bench and speak into microphones. The jury is made the equivalent of the ancient Athenian chorus whose voice continually judges the action and often echoes the collective view. The chorus members speak but occasionally chant their lines; this musical rhythm becomes progressively more powerful as the play unfolds.

The chorus members ponder the rumours they have heard of the slaughter in the night; they look for explanations, and finding none, consider spiritual answers. Tecmessa next takes the witness stand as a defence witness, and testifies to what she had seen, the plot here follows Sophocles. She gives the first hints of suicidal thoughts on the part of Ajax: “And the real darkness may begin to flow through him, a river more vicious than madness.” She tells a story of cattle slaughtered in a frenzy succeeded by an ominous stillness of the perpetrator: “And now he sits alone, among the slaughtered beasts, as if someone had slaughtered him – which is exactly the case.” This image – of silence amid

chaos, and the dissonance between outer stillness and inner emotional chaos – will be dramatized shortly.

For the chorus: "That's no way out for a soldier." "Even in peace, a shell sits in the brain waiting to explode." Tecmessa pleads with them to help Ajax: "Speak to him before he does something horrible." Cries coming from the box transfix them and then the box is wheeled away, leaving Ajax onstage. The newly revealed Ajax is terrifying and dangerous: breathing hard, dripping blood, his appearance stuns the chorus into silence. Ajax begins to sign furiously while a chorus member intones his first words: "I am nailed to a circus of blood." Blood and body are important metaphors that develop as the play progresses.

The inability to speak becomes part of the pathos of this Ajax: as King puts it, "The moment of *anagnorisis* is all the more pathetic because the words of self-discovery must be uttered by another."[25] In the theatre, however, all attention is on the *body* of this Ajax: bent over, twisted, spattering blood with every movement, signing furiously his words, signing that appears like frenzy. For spectators who do not understand sign language, this signing may appear frantic and directionless, but part of the effect is to focus insistently on the body as opposed to speech and words, the normal currency of theatre. Shifting the main focus from the voice to the body can be regarded as almost a transgressive move in a theatre usually focused on words.[26]

This is especially so when often the words spoken by the chorus members are at an emotional key at variance with the gestures of Ajax. At other times, the words did not synchronize with his movements, suggesting a manic state inadequately expressed through words but richly suggested in action. These dissonances distract and confuse, contributing to a sense of fracturing, of mind split from body, and both uncontrolled and

[25] King 1986: 11.
[26] On Seago's own experience of deaf-signing Sophocles, see Seago 1993 and Shurgot 2012: 26-7.

uncontrollable, in an approximation of madness. But the deafness and signing are also signs of isolation: as Foley points out "The hero's deafness communicated both his inability to see and hear as others do, and the tragic failure of communication between himself and his fellow generals."[27] This Ajax is even more isolated than Sophocles' protagonist.

Next, contrary to Sophocles, the chorus engages in dialogue with Ajax: they say they are there to escort him back to camp. Ajax begs them to kill him, but they refuse and try to comfort him, something Sophocles' chorus never does. Ajax calls for death in the "darkness is my light, death my sun" speech but refers also to Athena: "I am hunted by this irresistible woman. She won't rest until she has her revenge." Ajax ends with an apostrophe to death: "Burn me now, death, with all your heat, until I'm a cinder, speck of nothing."

The contours of the suicidal crisis are the same: the family tradition of heroic action, shame at falling short of this ideal, rage at the denial of the arms, humiliation of his misdirected vengeance and degradation among the slaughtered cattle. Ajax laments his proud American Indian ancestry, a great great-grandfather who had been a Sioux chief, a warrior who had once wiped out a troop of white soldiers. "Oh, how I dreamed that day, how it blazed me. For I knew that the Sioux blood had returned and was flowing through me full force. I would be the greatest of the war generals! The Great American War Chief! Which I was. For a time. Yes. For a time." Athena is actively blamed: she is "the female plague bearer…with malaria hands." Then Ajax says "But honor stolen in life may be regained by an honorable death. There is nothing else I can ask for. The last bright thing."

Ajax's speech "resonates a sort of bluesy moan, a deep lament that cycles acoustically between on the one hand a highly echoic and atmospheric wail, coming from

[27] Foley 2012: 148.

all sides, and on the other hand an unamplified and private blues that can be pinpointed as coming from Nelson, the chorus leader."[28] The lament appears to disorient the speaker, and perhaps the audience. In a culture where word and action are usually linked, splitting them apart renders each, both, inharmonious and discordant creating the possibility of multiple meanings through ambiguity. This equivalent to the impassioned song of the Sophoclean Ajax is highly effective.

In a re-making that departs from Sophocles and yet is utterly in character, this Ajax seeks one more way out of the dilemma of rage and thwarted desire: he attempts to lead his men in an insurrection. This is unlike the epic hero, who acts alone and whose men are often just ciphers. But the chorus members resist, and their resistance makes moral agents of them, even as it leads to Ajax's total isolation: at the point of their refusal to join him, Seago's Ajax, instead of signing, speaks himself in guttural tones, his only spoken line in the play: "How can you turn away from me now when I need you?" This attempted insurrection is a logical way out for *this* American Ajax, and another manifestation of the violence of his character and the potential violence it inspires. The refusal of his men to follow Ajax reinforces the suicidal crisis by isolating the protagonist, and stays true within both the psychology of its ancient forbear and modern research findings as discussed in Chapter Three.

The attempted insurrection serves another purpose: it enfolds itself almost organically within the local myth of the all-American hero, the individual against the collective, who can speak like this Ajax does: "I am my own general. I am Ajax's general. His fortunes and dreams are the only ones that I'm interested in. He is the only officer that I owe allegiance to." Ajax is country and general in one and this is a potent variation of the egoism of the Sophoclean Ajax, eminently suited to the individualist *ethos* of the American dream. It is also Sellars' interrogation of this American ideal: as Foley puts it:

[28] King 1986: 11.

"In creating an Ajax 'nailed to a circus of blood', whose violence and pride resonated not only with his Native American warrior ancestry, but with dangerous, marginally civilized, mythic, often antiheroic U.S. film heroes ranging from cowboys to sons of the Mafia...the play asked what this kind of ambiguous figure means to us now, and why he is so firmly lodged in our national imagination despite a reality that ignores him"—the reality of high tech warfare and of ruthless, competitive, media-savvy generals.[29]

But Ajax's men will not go where Ajax's vengeance leads: to war against the generals. This is dramatized effectively in music and rhythm: the men stamp their feet in unison, Ajax approaches close to them, but his feet are not in rhythm with theirs, he and his men are not one in intent as this dissonance reveals. Their refusal to follow him is another rejection, another failure to connect, and pushes Ajax towards his lonely death.

Only Tecmessa offers to accompany him: silently rejecting this offer, Ajax turns away and calls for his son. The speech here addressing his son is all Sophocles', and a perpetuation of military values in families. The image of the hulking Ajax with his little son is haunting and moving. But it is also one of the first silences in the play, a silence not in Sophocles but mediated through the figure of Acere / Eurysaces. Sellars has said that for him some of the most dramatic of moments in Sophocles are the gaps in the text, when we do not hear from those with the most to say.[30] Here, "the son has no words to speak to his *deaf* father."[31] [My italics]. This is another failure of communication signalled by deafness, another emotional isolation.

After he is done with his son, Ajax says "The answer to my problems now lies with the knife." And against Tecmessa's impassioned prayers he says, "You are presumptuous, Tecmessa and a little foolish, to think that at this point I could change my

[29] Foley 2012: 148.
[30] This is not solely a consequence of the three-actor rule as it could be argued applies in *Ajax*: the silences of Eurydice in *Antigone* (1243) and Deianeira in *Trachiniae* (812) discussed in Chapter One are examples of pregnant silences by main characters.
[31] Sellars 1989: 95.

nature because of your fears." Tecmessa's intervention has been on the same lines as Sophocles' but here the Latina blames herself for being the reason Ajax is distrusted by the other generals, bringing racism into the picture: "And I knew they laughed at you, the General, with his Lenin breasted wife, they'd say, don't they make a lovely couple? He kills them during the day and sleeps with them at night." Sellars sees Tecmessa as the "moral centre" of the play;[32] she pleads with Ajax to live, to protect her, she has no home to return to, no other family to turn to. When he suggests she return to her South American country, she points out that their marriage has made her a traitor to her own people. Violence colours this relationship just as it colours the relationship with Athena: when Tecmessa pleads, clutching Ajax at one point, he grips her by the throat. At the end of this scene, as he appears to have decided on suicide, he shoves her violently to the ground before he leaves. The chorus sings its laments for some ten minutes while Tecmessa remains on the ground, grieving, in distress. When Ajax returns to speak his "deception speech", he appears a changed man and this is dramatized through his treatment of Tecmessa. He is all gentleness and tenderness at this point: holds out his hand, she hesitates before accepting it, and he raises her. He speaks seemingly to her alone, not the chorus or the audience: "A moment ago I was an open razor, about to tear the flesh; but now my edge has softened, perhaps by a woman's touch…The greatest forces know when to let go…So why not wild Ajax, bending to the will of his superiors? Flexibility is the key…No telling, no predicting…". Tecmessa's words and situation appear to have genuinely touched him. He embraces her at the end while Athena looks stonily on. The expressed motivation here, therefore, is the need to get away, for time and space and solitude, to be alone. He wants to "wash the filth away…maybe then that phantom will decide to stop pursuing me…I must be on my way." Athena is pursuing him to his death.

[32] Sellars 1989: 95.

The Messenger is an *angelos* with enormous wings who speaks the language of angels and spirits resonant of Christian theology. In Calchas' pronouncements, Ajax chose to worship the spirit of man and consequently was dragged down to the sewers. But Athena was sent by the spirit of god to befriend and counsel Ajax, to "attend and administer to this soul, so it should not die, an angel spirit in the body of a woman, Athena." But Ajax repeatedly rejects her, then rapes her, after which "she curses him, and mires his mind in darkness, and sends him forth a slobbering killer."

This, therefore, is an Athena avenging insult and outrage, but only after a sustained effort to connect with and befriend Ajax, and even at this late stage offering a way out. The rape, taking place with the other acts of slaughter and attempted insurrection, form part of that quality of excess inherent in Sophocles' Ajax. How better to express excess in modern terms but to adopt sexual abuse, particularly loaded with outrage and opprobrium such as rape and cruelty? It is also a comment on the issues of rape in warfare, as discussed below.

The Messenger sings that God's mercy is infinite, and even now Athena offers the suicidal hero a way out: "Stay where you are, Ajax. Stay. Just one day. That's all. So you can truly know what you've done, and the world can witness you. Stay. And then I will free you from your depravity, and you can go forth once more. But in his heart Ajax fears that he will lose Ajax and in his pride he chooses hell." Again, as in Sophocles, we have the possibility of rescue, if time is allowed to play its part, but in Auletta's version this possibility is explored further and requires of Ajax self-knowledge and submission to judgment (the reference to witnessing). Refusing this means refusing the possibility of change in a perverse desire for self-preservation. The Messenger exhorts the chorus to get Ajax back, using force if necessary, "Otherwise he'll die." Tecmessa realizes that she has been deceived: "He had no other plan after all. You see, he loves something more than the child and me…Death. His death."

Throughout the suicide scene, the chorus member playing Teucer sits on stage and plays a bamboo flute, while the Messenger sings a blues song, 'Down by the Riverside': "I'm gonna lay down my burden now Down by the riverside, Gonna lay down my burdens now Down by the riverside, And study war no more, no more" and ending "I'm gonna lay down my sword and shield, Down by the riverside…"—an American equivalent of the chorus' *stasimon* lamenting war in Sophocles (*Aj.* 1193-8).

Ajax does not carry in the sword; instead Athena gives it to the Messenger who plants it in the floor: this suicide will happen, is inevitable and orchestrated by Athena, since Ajax has rejected her overtures. The stage darkens and Ajax enters. The suicide speech (voiced by the Messenger) follows Sophocles' closely, with farewells to "all this light, this burning American light, all around me: this sea, and foam, and tree, and face, and burning word of eye and ear" (a reference to Athena hovering over him). Ajax ends whispering that he'd continue speaking to his interlocutor, but in another place, which is an oblique reference to the Hades of Homer and Sophocles.

After Ajax impales himself, the Messenger sings the same song but this time with the refrain: "I'm going to put on my long white robe, Down by the riverside, And study war no more", repeating the last line. The Messenger pulls Ajax forward by a few feet, then leaves. The stage is dark except for the shaft of light through the open door. The windows at the back open, and from the high end of the raked floor, water begins flowing rapidly down the stage and into troughs at the front of the stage. The water washes around the body of Ajax even while the light from behind creates a shimmering glare off the cascading water. The video monitor begins showing waves crashing on the shore accompanied by a soundtrack of ocean waves. These stage effects of lights and sounds continue until the end of the play and constitute a sensory overload: the angled light, swirling water, sound of crashing waves. When these form the background to the raised

voices of Teucer, Menelaus and Agamemnon in the final scenes, the whole takes on a nightmarish quality.

Athena has hovered over Ajax throughout the suicide scene but he ignores her every time she approaches him, some three times in all. She speaks in sorrow after he has fallen on his sword, a speech that accuses Ajax of failure to recognize god, to act within boundaries, notwithstanding her repeated attempts to reach him. This is what has brought him to his death: time after time she had sought him out, finally in the form of a doe. He recognized her in the figure of the doe, but still he fired through her heart, then fled. Athena grieves: "It was he who wanted it this way, he was the one that chose this road." She has provided the sword to effect his death in compliance with this wish. Tecmessa and Athena speak alternate lines as they mourn over the body, human and goddess linked in their grief and loss, echoing the same sentiments. Athena: "He wanted it this way. I did not want this." Tecmessa: "He chose this".

The chorus member who played the flute, "the musical celebrant at the death rite of Ajax",[33] is now Teucer, and he takes the witness stand. This Teucer appears almost a double for Ajax, reflecting that the same actor is likely to have played both roles in the ancient Athenian theatre.[34] They share the same father and the same military tradition, but Teucer does not possess the eloquence and stature of Ajax. The scene with Menelaus turns shrill and divisive. Menelaus speaks similar words as in Sophocles: "An army, like a city, like a country, runs on discipline, order, respect." Ajax ignored this and feared nothing with an "immoral and indecent fearlessness", one that threatened Menelaus' authority. He gloats over the body, over having the final word over the dead enemy. When questioned how the disappearance of Ajax would be explained, Menelaus says: "As of

[33] King 1986: 13.
[34] Ibid.

now, this is a total security area – off limits to everyone. A piece of radiation has fallen on American soil, and it is too contaminated, too dangerous, to touch or to move."

Teucer, while defending Ajax's achievements and condemning the greed and venality of the generals, accuses Menelaus of wanting to desecrate the body, by kicking the face in or stamping on it, drawing attention to the fact that Menelaus is wading in the blood and water that surrounds the body. Teucer says, "I see you don't want to dirty your boots. And I respect that, your fastidiousness. So here, use this." And he offers his knife to Menelaus to complete his victory by mutilating the body himself. We sense that the moderate sounding words of Menelaus are mere window-dressing, that Menelaus is as much given to violence as Ajax on less excuse, and the invitation to mutilation signifies the obscenity of this desire. Offering Menelaus the opportunity to match violence to words and intent dramatizes the latent violence of this character, and thus by extension the habituation to violence and aggression in the generals.

With the entrance of Agamemnon, the sense of claustrophobia continues. For King, the anti-climactic atmosphere of the post-suicide sequences is deliberate: the archetypal, timeless situation of the tragic hero has ended with his death, and the more venal, political manoeuvres return, so the atmosphere takes on a distinctively twentieth-century character. "The dignity and willfulness, brutality and madness, that were compact in the figure of Ajax are abstracted during the second half and apportioned among the remaining characters who are more singly determined. The effect is of a marked loss in complexity of characterization along with an increase in exaggeration."[35]

Agamemnon speaks even more rhetorically than Menelaus, extolling trust in leaders, in the democratic process, and the process of law, but undercutting these with threats against Tecmessa and Teucer: both are foreigners and potential traitors. Agamemnon's ancestry – his forebears came over with the Pilgrim fathers – mark him

[35] King 1986: 14-5.

out as a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant male, superior to all others, whether American Indian or subsequent immigrant, thus putting racism into the equation. But the provocations of race go beyond the surface meanings since these words are spoken by a black actor, in the dress of a five-star general, in the days before America had any black generals, and calling on the Pilgrim fathers in a context hardly congruent with the facts of racial identity, again forcing a disconnect between word and meaning. This is one of the many ways in which the provocations of race have taken place onstage throughout the production, with its mixed-race cast taking on roles of generals and goddesses.

While the dialogue is going on, Tecmessa and Acere kneel next to the body while the chorus stands over them, forming a pathetic tableau. Sellars has spoken of eloquent silences and for him: "The second half of this play is one of Sophocles' greatest inspirations because the true argument is being made by the silent figures, while the speeches are, as usual, given to the generals."[36]

The play ends with Odysseus saving the day not only through an appeal to friendship but by appealing to Agamemnon's self-interest. For this Odysseus, it is not humans who are shadows, but "our achievements, our dreams", as he tells Athena at the beginning of the play. Here in the final scene he persuades Agamemnon to permit the burial of the corpse, in order not to jeopardize their future reputations. A policy of expediency, it is informed by both humanity and self-interest.

The chorus congratulates Odysseus on playing the game well, suggesting they see into his self-interest. But the ending follows the ancient play. The chorus echoes Sophocles' lines: "if we aren't careful with every moment, every sight, the dark will come in with the tide and the future will wipe us out." This takes us back to the beginning, and to the words of Athena: the future is uncertain, outcomes unpredictable.

[36] Sellars 1989: 95.

Perhaps the most unpredictable of outcomes comes towards the end with the sense of uncertainty over whether Ajax is really dead. The body has moved at several points, both when Menelaus attacked it and when Agamemnon approached, and now Teucer cries out that the body is warm. This pushes the contingency of the play into possibilities suggested by the fifth century context: for the Athenians, Ajax lived on in cult, a potent protector and hero.[37]

The final provocation comes when in the last scene, the blinds over the windows go up, exposing the Pentagon as an empty façade.

Sellars' and Auletta's vision stayed true to the suicidal crisis in Sophocles and the latest research findings discussed in Chapter Three (see summary at pages 129-131). Suffering psychologically from the loss of the arms that signified his greatness, foiled of his revenge, facing a court martial of his peers presided over by a female deity he has himself scorned and assaulted, tortured by the sense of having failed his own forbears and martial legacy, isolated by multiple betrayals and rejections by his brother generals and by his men who refuse to follow him into a revolt, his situation is emblematic of being trapped with no way out except a death that will in some manner rehabilitate what has gone before. Stagecraft and acting dramatize these in powerful and moving ways. More significantly, the suicidal crisis is firmly situated within a contemporary American context and interrogates the quintessentially American ethos that exacerbates such a crisis.

5.4 Critical reception

[37] There is even a hint of the Ajax of Aeschylus, invincible everywhere except in his armpit, who needs the help of a goddess to kill himself.

While the critics were divided over the relative success of the production and questioned some of the anachronisms, its boldness and energy were praised, and from the perspective of this thesis, it is important to notice how critics concentrated on the psychological portrait of Ajax. For Sylviane Gold writing in the *Wall Street Journal*[38], Auletta's fidelity to Sophocles created more problems that it solved but these "dwindled to insignificance beside the flamboyant directorial innovations of Mr Sellars", creating moments of "transcendent, overwhelming beauty" including the "epiphanies" of the blues lamentation of the chorus. Howie Seago's performance is "manhood gone murderously berserk, terrifying and terrifyingly awesome."

Jack Kroll in *Newsweek*[39] called the production "audacious", pointing out that the façade of the Pentagon became a "potent theatrical metaphor that fuses two cultures into a timeless immediacy". He too praises the choice and acting of Howie Seago, calling it "inspired" in creating "a devastating, frightening, moving portrait of a shattered spirit" portraying the "primal power of Greek tragedy". The chorus' singing was also praised, Arthur Holmberg in the *New York Times* pointing out that the choral odes are built on spirituals, Mississippi moans and chain gang chants, and quoting Sellars "I needed music to make the chorus more lyrical. Black music is the bedrock of popular American music. Since it expresses deep sorrow, it created the right emotional context for the play."[40]

Berserk manhood, a shattered spirit, deep sorrow—these critics were responding to the psychological authenticity of Sellars' reading of Sophocles. Yet the play itself did not perform to packed audiences and the Washington performance closed a week early, with the reasons put down to negative reviews or poor sales during the July 4th Independence Day weekend in the capital. The *New York Times* speculated that a deaf actor delivering his lines in sign language may have been "too far out for Washington

[38] Gold 1986.
[39] Kroll 1986.
[40] Holmberg 1987.

audiences" who stayed away.[41] But given the multiple provocations of the production, and Sellars' avowed aims, popular success did not appear to be a paramount intent. Sellars and Auletta had other, more challenging, tasks and motives. The choice of text, the location and the innovative choices in the staging and use of technology, deliberately set out to create a disorienting, even hallucinatory piece of theatre, insistently posing questions about why a great man chooses suicide and leaving the answers ambiguous in a very Sophoclean manner.

5.5 Challenging Institutions: Military Adventurism and Democracy

Sellars' treatment has updated Sophocles for late twentieth-century America much as Sophocles' *Ajax* updated Homer for mid-to-late fifth-century Athens. He re-visions the play in exciting ways, pushing contingency radically towards the future. In particular he transforms the suicidal crisis affecting one man into a hallucinatory crisis affecting an entire institution, that is, the military and its ideals. This is captured in one very powerful image: the Pentagon.

This image of the Pentagon figured from the very beginning of ideas for the production. The Pentagon itself certainly dominated Sellars' working life at that time for he had been appointed director of the American National Theater, in Washington D.C. located very close to the Pentagon. Questions of staging appear to have been uppermost since it appears that Sellars started on the design of the set long before he requested Robert Auletta to update the play to the 1980s; in 1989, he spoke of spending almost a year designing the set, which went through different forms.[42] Auletta, on the other hand, was asked to turn in a first draft in two weeks and a final draft in six weeks,[43] even though the

[41] Molotsky and Weaver 1986.
[42] Sellars 1989: 94.
[43] Auletta 1986.

project had been in gestation for a long time. Auletta was specifically asked to do a modern version set against an image of the Pentagon.

Sophocles' *Ajax* possessed a potent appeal in its potential for criticism of the military and its excesses. Though the 1980s were a decade when the US was not officially at war, the memory of Vietnam was fresh while military adventurism was occurring within a culture of government unaccountability and lack of transparency. In a 1989 speech, Sellars spoke of the shock of the April 1986 US bombing of Gaddafi's Libya, "a large-scale military gesture" made without consultation with Congress which "completed Reagan's imperial presidency".[44] In 1992, Sellars also commented that it was a retrospective on the Vietnam War.[45]

This took on added significance to a director of the *national* theatre: for Sellars, the role imbued him "with a public responsibility to permit the nation to think about itself",[46] equivalent to the *ethos* of ancient Greek public drama which questioned and interrogated the city. This was all the more important for the theatre in an America where the major voices in the media operated under censorship,[47] and within a culture that lacked a sense of the past and sought entertainment instead of dealing with difficult questions. Sellars says he turned to Sophocles for "two things that were crucial to my survival in America. One is the ability to speak of the subject without flattery"—that is without having to entice or seduce the audience, but to tell it straight, as it were.[48]

The second was a moral question: how is it possible to live morally in this society? It was within a context of "massive public passivity" and a "feeling of helplessness in a world that we can no longer fix" that around 1986, Sellars "turned to Sophocles for some

[44] Sellars 1989: 90. This episode also informs Auletta's completion of the playscript and Athena's role in it: Auletta 1986 Notes 17.
[45] McDonald 1992.
[46] Sellars 1989: 89.
[47] Sellars 1989: 89-90.
[48] Sellars 1989: 92.

help with the question of what is a single individual and is it possible to live?"[49] For the theatre is about individuals and their choices: "Theater explains that one individual's decision, about how to live his life or not, is what makes the moral climate and temperature of a nation, and affects the political direction and temper of a time."[50] Ajax's refusal to live, to compromise within a system in which he had achieved success and glory but is disgraced and destroyed, becomes a commentary not only on masculinity and suicide today, but on the institutions themselves.

It is not only the military which is interrogated and found wanting in *Ajax*, but democracy itself is questioned, with the dramatization of a possibly rigged trial against accusations of rigged elections. In a later speech delivered in 2002, Sellars speaks eloquently of coming to theatre through democracy: "I keep being obsessed with Greek drama, because I'm way more interested in democracy than I am in theater."[51] Greek drama accompanied the social experiment that was democracy and for Sellars, important themes in direct democracy must derive from the function of theatre as he saw it. Theatre was that place where the entire society came together, recounted common stories which permitted the discussion of the "unspeakable". Theatre mediated those conditions under which difficult or nearly impossible matters, could be spoken in public.[52] The incessant question "why?" keeps being asked and explored.

Sellars eschews attempting to imagine the actual Greek theatre to asking about the functions of that theatre: "What types of things was this theatre trying to accomplish? And how could we go about accomplishing those things to create not just a night in the theater, but a society we can live in?"[53] At the same time, paradoxically, tragedy is always informed by failure. It is about "the people for whom it didn't work out…the stories of

[49] Sellars 1989: 92-3.
[50] Sellars 1989:93.
[51] Sellars 2003: 144.
[52] Ibid. 145.
[53] Ibid. 150.

failures that have more grandeur, more humanity and more aspiration in them than all the success stories in the world."[54] The most important question is his belief that "…the hope of the Greek theater is its direct political engagement."[55] And yet, in the programme notes to *Ajax*, Sellars wrote that *Ajax* takes us into "a region well beyond our political preferences."[56] This is not necessarily contradictory; *Ajax* attempts the larger questions, not the petty parochialism of party politics. The whole courtroom setting of the play is an insistent appeal to democracy: sitting in judgment, balancing truth against falsehood, finding for one party or another. It echoes Sophocles' even-handed treatment of the rigged votes in the contest for the arms, votes claimed as rigged by Ajax and Teucer but denied by Menelaus and Agamemnon and left unproven. Auletta keeps the same references and the appeal to the verdict on the judgment of the arms becomes an appeal to law and due process in the mouth of Agamemnon. More importantly, the audience is invited to take the roles of the chorus, who model their democratic duties as jurors.

Democracy figures more explicitly in Sellars' later plays such as *The Children of Heracles* with its direct audience participation and discussion.[57] The *Ajax* is an early experiment but a powerful one, asking hard questions about military adventurism, war's impact on families and soldiers, the compromises and sell-outs by the top brass, and the need for accountability and judgment. Ajax's suicide is the response to a situation of unfairness that is unliveable for him; this production asks its audiences to think through it also about how unfairness in some ways makes modern society unliveable for all of us.

5.6 Blowing open theatre: multiple provocations

[54] Ibid. 152.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Quoted in King 1986: 10.
[57] Sellars 2003.

As described above, the production used technology and staging innovatively to create an immersive experience combining sound and lighting effects. The staging created a series of actions and impressions that were discordant and incongruous, in constant collision and contention, which I characterize throughout as "dissonance". These dissonances continually posed a series of questions, open-ended and varied, prompting insistent "whys". I suggest that this method is indeed Sophoclean in its dramatization and staging of "why".

As Fischer-Lichte describes it, Sellars employs a "ludic process of creating a collision of the text with other materials which superficially bear no relationship to it, [which] allows us to find out what kinds of new meanings can be generated."[58] *Ajax* is an example of how multiple meanings may be generated through a combination of stagecraft and technology in the service of bold ideas and energy. Yet the word "ludic" with its suggestion of spontaneous or undirected playfulness militates against the careful thought and planning that went into the staging in order to create an exceptionally unsettling experience.

These staging choices make tremendous use of metaphors to bring home the multiple meanings of the text. Body and blood are just two of the most powerful metaphors. Greek theatre involved the whole body in dance, song and speech, and in this production much is achieved by gesture, song and speech. Ajax was in antiquity traditionally associated with body through his great bulk and strength so the choice of Seago and the use of signing to focus attention on the body can only be called inspired. Sellars has said: "In having the central part of the drama expressed in very powerful, intense sign language, one got this sheer visceral rage and intensity that lies at the core of the drama."[59] But signing's "language of gesture" can also be compared to dance: "It was

[58] Fischer-Lichte 2010: 35.
[59] Sellars 1989: 93.

also very important that the Greek theater was dance, and that the emotional impact of the words was accompanied by the physical impact of a dance gesture."[60]

I have also mentioned how splitting apart body and voice serves to accentuate Ajax's isolation, marking him out as both mad, and desperate and despairing, cut off from everyone else around him. The glass case in which he first appears is a wonderful approximation of the *ekkyklema* but improves upon it by making concrete Ajax's sealing off in the world of madness, while also objectifying him as the accused in the trial, too dangerous to be released, as dangerous as a terrorist or atomic waste (Menelaus says Ajax's dead body has transformed the beach into a radioactive wasteland).[61] He is both terrifying and pathetic, his gestures and speech violent, frenzied, crazed. The prospect of his being set free is menacing and threatening both to the internal audience (Odysseus and the chorus) and the external audience. But the glass cage remains a metaphor for isolation; though once freed from the cage, Ajax's isolation grows and ends in suicide.

The glass box also contains the blood of the slaughtered animals: Ajax is marked out by blood, from first to last. In the glass box he is sloshing in the blood of his animal victims. On his release, he trails blood everywhere, splashes it about with every signing gesture, every turn of his body. When he impales himself, blood spurts from his dying body and mixes with the water which commences to pour down the raked stage. Sellars has said that the raked stage and the pouring blood were meant to conjure up an abattoir, where animals are butchered every day, the blood and guts are washed out and then the butchery occurs again the next day, in a continuing cycle of violence.[62] This, we are reminded, is the back entrance of the Pentagon.

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[60] Ibid.

[61] Sellars has described theatre's task "to create an art that represents the public complexity, where one creates something that is, for example, as complex as the task of cleaning up a nuclear waste disposal site, which requires real thought, genuine expertise, and a series of very difficult decisions. It is not fun." 1989: 90-1.

[62] Sellars 1989: 94.

Blood and water bathe the stage upon which the generals and Teucer argue, making Menelaus and Agamemnon literally wade in the blood of their adversary even as they gloat over his destruction and plan his annihilation. Blood is referred to also in the confrontations between Athena and Ajax: the blood spilt during her rape, and when he attempts to kill her in the form of a doe.

The provocations of race and sex are also powerful and unsettling, and continually pose questions of American identity and personhood, with African-American and Asian-American actors, references to American Indian ancestry, and the Pilgrim fathers. Nothing is kept safe or unquestioned, the play opens up all its characters and situations for interrogation.

5.7 Athena and Ajax

It is interesting to look at the genesis of this figure. At the outset of his task, Auletta confesses to anxieties about the "massive update".[63] Certain elements were especially difficult: the chorus, the language, Athena. Tecmessa became his way into the text: once she was conceived as an outsider, specifically a Latina, the setting became a war in Latin America, which in the timing of the play, has just concluded.[64] Auletta strove to find the right balance between making the story "real" but also deliberately retaining some of the "strange poetry and the wildness of its actions". This was not envisaged as a completely contemporary updating. In his words, Auletta struggled the most with the figure of Athena. He considered and discarded various notions: celebrity glamour, lady Liberty, and in a striving after the archetypal, the Jungian anima figure. Finally "I imagined her out West, among the mountains and prairies, a kind of Whitmanesque diety [sic] in love with Ajax, who is a man much more in love with war and valor than he could ever be

[63] Auletta 1986 Notes 16.

[64] Auletta assumes wrongly that the Trojan war had already ended at the point at which Sophocles' *Ajax* opens.

with any woman…Their relationship became real to me; sparks of flesh and blood began to pass between them… Athena began to depart from the Sophoclean text."[65] In the end, he says "Athena created her own laws and in her speech [over the dead body of Ajax] she exposed the heart of her relationship with Ajax." This is the speech in which she describes her long courtship of Ajax but his refusal of her aid and attempt to kill her when she takes the form of a doe, all of which culminate in his lonely death by the beach.

This Ajax had exceeded the boundaries of the human, had failed to honour the limitations necessary to man's nature, had failed to recognize god, and paid the price in madness. But he is chosen, his nobility is recognized, and he is given chance after chance to repent, to re-consider, to know himself, but like his ancient namesake, this Ajax also makes his own way. This Athena, with her personal relationship to Ajax, focuses exclusively on him rather than siding with or protecting the other generals, and accordingly increases the stature of Ajax, even as his fate is a warning to the other generals as expressed in the prologue, words that Auletta says were directly motivated by the aftermath of the 1986 airstrike on Libya.[66]

As a personal deity, Athena is made sexually exciting and enticing, creating a zone of sexual tension especially in the scenes at the start of the play. The rejection of deity, which could be understood on one level as personified conscience, punishes, drives to madness, and destroys. There was no attempt to clarify the contradictions: Athena made for intrigue, and sexual tension and dramatized the quality of excess that goes with transgressions of boundaries. Indeed by making Athena flesh and blood, she helps develop the themes of excess and *hubris* inherent or dormant in the character of Ajax in provocatively contemporary terms. This Ajax denies god, denies limitations, is violent to women, using them as sexual playthings. This forms another strand in the criticism of

[65] Auletta 1986 Notes 17.
[66] Ibid.

war and of rape as a weapon of war. Beginning with Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, published in 1975, rape in war was very much part of cultural discussions in the 1980s. The rape of Athena would have carried resonances of excess in specifically contemporary ways at the time of the play's performance, exemplifying Ajax's transgressions. If Sophocles' Athena is a goddess different from the Homeric Athena, who is never shown to be antagonistic to Homer's Ajax, then Auletta's Athena is different altogether and admirably serves different theatrical ends in this particular theatrical vision.

5.8 Conclusion

The title to this chapter is taken from Sellars' 2002 speech at the Getty Villa in which he said: "What's really interesting is not: Can we translate the Greeks into our theater? It's: Can we use the Greeks to blow open our theater?"[67]

This chapter has argued that Sellars' *Ajax* has performed precisely that function of blowing open theatre. While retaining the myth of Ajax and most of Sophocles' play, it was provocative in its multiple messages, relentlessly interrogating politics, democracy, military opportunism, racism, and sexism while staying true to Sophocles' psychological dramatisation of how a suicidal crisis afflicts the sufferer and the whole community. By making the isolated suicidal hero deaf, he brilliantly underscored the loneliness of the person who has resolved to die despite the protests and disapproval of their community. In its radical re-visioning, it combined elements of ancient and modern in unusual and striking ways that contrived to open up the myth to modern interpretations while exploring the difficult questions so often posed in Greek tragedy. In my view, one reason why Sellars was able to do this was by his choice of a tragedy portraying the gravest of emotional situations, but one that has actually changed little over time.

[67] Sellars 2003: 148.

The bold staging has also meant that Sellars has resisted domesticating the play entirely, and instead retains the strangeness of the historical artefact that is Sophocles' *Ajax*, finding modern parallels for its ancient themes in acting, music, song, metaphors of blood, cages, and abattoirs, all revolving around on the titanic figure of the isolated suicidal fighting man. This production shocked: it shook up, it confounded, it mesmerized, it questioned. Given these qualities, it could almost have been predicted that the production would be unlikely to achieve popularity, and especially not in its original venue in Washington, where the Pentagon, location of its challenging action, is situated.

Sellars and Auletta went on to produce Aeschylus' *Persians* in 1993, also using Seago, in a version that was overtly critical of the role of the U.S. in the First Gulf War, and much more stridently anti-war.[68] In a discussion of that production and the *Ajax*, Foley concludes that for the latter: "Despite the contemporary setting, the play's hypothetical war (Auletta says in his introduction that he deliberately avoided mentioning Vietnam) and the powerful and original portrait of the hero nevertheless permitted this controversial adaptation to retain a more compelling tragic authority for some audience members than *Persians*."[69]

The sufferings of Ajax are cogently portrayed and psychologically comprehensible within the production, and the epic warrior loses nothing by way of stature, while his suicidal crisis, along with its impact on his loved ones and wider community, also interrogates questions of identity, of war, and of the American hero. It became an exemplar of making a less well known tragedy comprehensible today from multiple angles.

[68] Foley 2012: 139-41.
[69] Ibid. 149.

Chapter 6

"Resurrecting an ancient general":

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and staged readings of the *Ajax*

This chapter looks at staged readings of the *Ajax*, which are the most prominent vehicle for performing this play in the United States. It asks how these adapt the play and treat the issue of suicide. The two main practitioners and proponents of staged readings are Aquila Theatre, run by Peter Meineck, and Theater of War, run by Bryan Doerries. Meineck's 'Homecoming' initiative addresses the public rather than specifically veteran or mental health audiences, and receives financial support from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Both programmes have been endorsed by the U.S. military in mental health programmes targeted at service personnel and war veterans in efforts to address high rates of suicide and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) amongst US veterans and service personnel. In recent years, Doerries has extended the programme to trauma sufferers in general. Using ancient Greek drama in this way constitutes a form of Classical Reception which purports to go beyond performance into therapeutic healing and mental health management generally.

I will look first (6.1) briefly at PTSD and trace the early history of the syndrome, its formal identification, and its more recent manifestations. I next (6.2) discuss Jonathan Shay's seminal contribution to this discussion, and subsequent classicists' adoption of these readings and criticisms of the same. Then (6.3) I look at how *Ajax* is interpreted within staged readings by Theater of War and its goals and motives, and whether (and if so how) they contribute to the understanding of suicide, as distinct from or at least as only intersecting with, rather than being commensurate, with PTSD, and how staged readings are used to address or not to address other pressing issues in American society and culture.

I end by arguing (6.4) that my own approach to the psychological content of *Ajax* is different from that taken in such staged readings.

6.1 PTSD and the traumas of war

PTSD was first named in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-III* in 1980, the end result of a process heavily influenced by the Vietnam War. Many returning American soldiers from that war displayed troubling psychological symptoms that seemed to call out for proper treatment, treatment that was not available unless their problems could be regarded as service-related.[1] A number of studies have set out the lack of exhaustive epidemiological studies and the contradictory results and weakness of the evidence purporting to substantiate these symptoms in Vietnam combat veterans who formed the original cohort.[2] Young, in his closely argued study, shows how the syndrome was poorly defined from the outset: rather than beginning from clearly defined past events, it came to cover a wide variety of behaviours which were then read backwards into vague memories.[3] Other studies of trauma suggest that a majority of the symptoms attributable to PTSD belong to depression and anxiety disorders: persons with a pre-disposition to these are at greater risk of PTSD. This may explain why a large majority of those returning from the Vietnam War appeared not to suffer from debilitating symptoms. For those who did, a key driver for categorizing the new syndrome was to enable sufferers to claim financial compensation for war injuries that would otherwise remain non-compensable. Accordingly, political, financial and above all moral issues have complicated this diagnosis from the beginning. As Horwitz and Wakefield say:

[1] Young 1995.
[2] Young 1995, Jones & Wessely 2005, Shephard 2000.
[3] Young 1995.

> "Perhaps more than any other *DSM* category, PTSD diagnoses involve questions of right and wrong in addition to dispassionate issues of fact. On one side, patients are viewed as victimized and in need of help; people who question sufferers' disordered status are seen as uncaring or immoral. On the other side, skeptics have regarded patients claiming PTSD diagnosis as cowards, malingerers, or fortune hunters. PTSD diagnoses, then, often create morally charged boundaries."[4]

Moreover,

> "The development of the new PTSD diagnosis in the *DSM-III* had none of the trappings of other conditions such as field trials of criteria, tests of reliability, and statistical analyses of data. The veterans' advocates relied on the moral argument that failing to include a PTSD diagnosis in the new manual would be tantamount to blaming victims for their misfortunes. In a highly charged cultural climate still reeling from the aftermath of the war, their ethical position prevailed over the data-driven arguments that succeeded in the creation of other diagnoses. The result was that the DSM-III incorporated a PTSD diagnosis that almost completely followed the recommendations of the anti-war psychiatric group."[5]

6.2 PTSD and ancient battle experience

The purported link to the ancient world began with Jonathan Shay's landmark *Achilles in Vietnam*, which explicitly links the emotions and actions of Achilles in Homer's *Iliad* with the PTSD suffered by Vietnam veterans.[6] Shay is a psychiatrist with the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs and argues that PTSD is "an injury…the experience of having people trying to kill you, or witnessing them killing people that you know and care about" and "the persistence into civilian life of valid adaptations to combat", such as

[4] Horwitz and Wakefield 2012: 170.
[5] Ibid. 179.
[6] Shay 1994.

anger.[7] Such trauma act to trigger a broad range of impacts, summarized as follows from the most recent *DSM V*'s four major symptom clusters as follows:

- Re-experiencing the event — for example, spontaneous memories of the traumatic event, recurrent dreams related to it, flashbacks or other intense or prolonged psychological distress.
- Heightened arousal — for example, aggressive, reckless or self-destructive behaviour, sleep disturbances, hyper-vigilance or related problems.
- Avoidance — for example, distressing memories, thoughts, feelings or external reminders of the event.
- Negative thoughts and mood or feelings — for example, feelings may vary from a persistent and distorted sense of blame of self or others, to estrangement from others or markedly diminished interest in activities, to an inability to remember key aspects of the event.

Shay argues that combat trauma persists across time, and for *all* wars, and even in 2010 is at pains to insist that it was not particular to the American experience in Vietnam: "But it's all the same phenomenon. This isn't something that was invented during the Vietnam War or by Vietnam veterans. It's something that has been with us since the beginning of the human species."[8] This trans-historical interpretation, based largely on an ancient poem read into contemporary accounts of trauma, has been both embraced and challenged within classics.[9]

Lawrence Tritle, a classicist and himself a Vietnam veteran, uses human biochemistry to argue that trauma is a universalized physiological experience of war, in

[7] Shay 2010: 48.
[8] Ibid. 49.
[9] For example the positive review of Shay in *BMCR* by Goetsch 1994. The opposite position is taken by Farrell 2004 who suggests that Shay has been manipulated by "the burnouts and washups" and has no idea of soldiers' language or fairy tales.

that the human body's experience of violence "works in the same way for the ancient Greek world as it does for the modern",[10] and PTSD is not, what conservatives in the U.S. call it, that is, "a political-social construct of anti-war psychiatrists".[11] In his article '"Ravished Minds" in the Ancient World'[12] Tritle utilizes research on physiological reactions to trauma to argue that, since bodily responses have been unchanged for millennia, the experience of trauma must have been one with which the ancients were familiar. He draws on a small number of examples: Gorgias' description in the *Encomium of Helen* 15-17 of the fear that the sight of the phalanx provokes, Herodotus' description of the soldier Epizelus who becomes blind on the eve of battle (6.117), Xenophon on the madness of Clearchus (*Anabasis* 2.6), and Alexander the Great's slaying of Cleitus (Plutarch *Life of Alexander* 16, 50-1).[13]

Tritle's arguments have been criticized by other classicists from a number of perspectives. His is a highly personal reading, drawing on his own experiences in Vietnam, even if his view that "the human experience with violence, culture, and survival is one that transcends time"[14] is correct as far as the ubiquity of violence in human society goes. However as a reviewer in *BMCR* put it, "[by] insisting on exact and consistent cross-cultural matches between Greece and the United States, Tritle tends to read more than is warranted into the ancient evidence."[15] In addition, some correspondences do not work and are not worked through: in his *From Melos to My Lai* neither Melos nor My Lai is properly addressed: the massacre at Melos was not a one-off, atypical decision taken by the Athenians, but in the circumstances they were in as an imperial power, it was accepted and even conventional in the ancient world; My Lai was not accepted practice, and

[10] Tritle 2000: 10.
[11] Ibid. 197.
[12] Tritle 2014: 87-103.
[13] In Tritle 2003.
[14] Tritle 2000: xii.
[15] Lee 2001

became the cause of outrage and court martials when revealed.[16] In fact Tritle's view that the My Lai massacre arose from a "contagion of violence...in which...scared men began striking back at perceived enemies"[17] has been challenged, as I discuss in the final section below.

In an article examining whether Roman soldiers suffered from PTSD, Melchior notes that while bio-chemical responses to stress *during* battle (trembling, fear, panic, flight) may have been identical in antiquity to these emotions now, what is unproved is using the same symptoms to indicate continuity of behaviour through time with a "consequent expectation that men will also react identically *after* battle."[18] In addition, he points out that studies indicate "a high correlation between head trauma and the occurrence of subsequent psychological problems", suggesting that PTSD may be associated with the arrival of modern warfare and the effect of the technology, much of it new in World War One,[19] of gunpowder, shells, and plastic explosives, and chemical weapons on concussive brain injuries.[20] Certainly the first description of the precursor to PTSD was shellshock, associated with the particular circumstances of the trench warfare of World War One. The battlefields of the ancient world were far different. In addition, since the ancients were far more exposed to war and habituated to violence even in civilian life with animal sacrifices and public punishments, violence may have been more socially acceptable and accordingly caused less trauma as understood in modern attitudes to and experiences of war.[21]

Victor David Hanson, in his seminal study of Greek warfare *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece*, says that the "unique cohesiveness that existed among individuals within a phalanx accounts for much of the success achieved by Greek

[16] Ibid.
[17] Tritle 2000: 122.
[18] Melchior 2011: 215.
[19] Moore 1987.
[20] Ibid. 219.
[21] Melchior 2011.

hoplites",[22] and identified two factors that contributed to this: "First the armament and tactics of the ancient phalanx were ideally suited to ideas of loyalty and friendship; fighting together in column, rather than spread along a line, drew all in close physical proximity with each other: a man's moment of bravery or lapse into cowardice was manifest to all who fought in rows and files to his rear, front and side", while "the nature of hoplite equipment - especially the shield - dictated that each became dependent on the man to his right for the protection of his own right side."[23]

Hanson continues,

> "The second and more important consideration is the peculiar nature of the ties among the men of the phalanx: unlike most modern armies, the bonds between hoplites on the line did not originate within military service or in weeks of shared drill in boot camp; they were natural extensions of already long-standing peacetime friendships and kinships. So far as we know, hoplites in nearly all city-states were deployed in their phalanxes by tribe, and most likely were of course well acquainted with those of their own time or deme. Men who knew each other through political, religious, and ceremonial associations and who may have been related strengthened these existing bonds as they fought side by side in the phalanx."[24]

In an investigation into the Athenian hoplite's *psychological capacity* for combat, Jason Crowley develops this argument further in *Beyond the Universal Soldier: Combat Trauma in Classical Antiquity*.[25] He disagrees with Hanson in proposing that the phalanx would have been deployed by *deme* rather than tribe, but in other respects he demonstrates that the socio-political-religious system of Classical Athens was one that produced a hoplite already socialized to martial combat on the battlefield. Combat defined a man as

[22] Hanson 2000: 117.
[23] Ibid. 119.
[24] Ibid. 121.
[25] Crowley 2014: 105-130.

a man: "manhood was not a passive state an individual attained merely by virtue of reaching sexual and physical maturity. It was, instead, a social construction both derived from the role of the warrior and contingent upon the actual performance of that role."[26]

Throughout the fifth century, war was endemic in Greece: Athens thrived in this environment, becoming "an imperially orientated military powerhouse empowered by an enabling ideology of expansionism and interventionism which actively embraced the institution of war and ruthlessly deployed it in the furtherance of her interests…The Athenians glorified war, they accorded it, as an institution, an unprecedented level of prestige, they surrounded themselves with monuments, images, inscriptions and dedications lauding their military achievements, they affirmed their status as a warrior community through civic, religious, dramatic and sporting events, and they endlessly expressed their martial virtues in oratory, comedy, tragedy, philosophy and history."[27]

And while combat entailed the hoplite "repeatedly and frenziedly to stab to death any human beings he found to his immediate front until his phalanx broke that of his opponents, or was itself broken in the attempt", this act of killing nevertheless "seems to have excited no noticeable revulsion among Athenian hoplites".[28] It was accepted as inevitable in a world governed by the principle of helping friends and harming enemies.

Religion actively supported the perpetuation of a martial culture: "throughout the period under discussion [the fifth century], the Greek warrior saw the gods as a potential source of support, since they could, if they so wished, become his staunchest allies, imbue him with courage, work harm against his enemies, and grant him victory. Accordingly, the Greeks did their best to actualize this potential, that is to say they endeavoured to solicit, establish and maintain divine approval, usually before allowing a dispute to escalate into armed conflict, before an army marched off to war, and once again before

[26] Ibid. 88.
[27] Ibid. 91.
[28] Ibid. 92.

combat was joined, at which point last-minute appeals could be made to the gods, including the promise of future dedications in return for victory in the field."[29] Gods and heroes: the Aeacids including Ajax were called upon for support before the battle for Salamis, and spoils of war dedicated to them after the victory (Herodotus 8.64).

A different perspective is applied by David Konstan in the volume edited by himself and Peter Meineck in 2014, *Combat Trauma and the Ancient Greeks.* While conceding that "the Greeks and Romans seem never to have identified the pathology of combat trauma",[30] Konstan speculates that this may well be a "blind spot" which moderns shared with the ancients up until World War One. He advances the idea that trauma and its effects may have been masked in the ancients through trigger tempers and propensity to violence: "The cause may lie in a valorization of irascibility, or a disposition to pugnaciousness, which was nourished by combat experience and which in turn inclined them to fight whenever they thought their honor had been challenged."[31] "Perhaps the most basic cause of this blind spot was the pervasive glorification of militarism, and the idea that it was a necessary condition for survival in a world where enemies might always attack and defeat might well mean annihilation. Under such conditions, any acknowledgment of the negative consequences of war was repressed beneath the dominant celebration of valor and duty."[32] Thus the arguments of Melchior and Crowley for disallowing the syndrome are here turned on their head to suggest widespread *repression* on the part of the ancients.

However as Melchior says, "The view that the Graeco-Roman world knew PTSD is fast becoming dogma."[33] Cardeña and Ustinova summarize the alleged ancient sources in a 2014 article 'Combat Stress Disorders and Their Treatment in Ancient Greece' in the

[29] Ibid. 98.
[30] Meineck & Konstan 2014: 2.
[31] Ibid. page 8.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Melchior 2011: 223.

journal *Psychological Trauma*,[34] while Meineck writes in 2016, "The effects of combat trauma are well described in the dramatic literature of the Ancient Greeks: the madness of Herakles, the rage of Achilles, the suicide of Ajax, the isolation of Philoctetes, and the trials of Odysseus, to name just a few. Much of the narrative content of Athenian tragedy reflected a preoccupation with the consequences of violence and war."[35] In the former article, the sources which are drawn on extend over a long time period, and much reliance is placed on Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen* 15-17 which speaks of the fear induced by the sight of the phalanx. But *tragedy* forms a major source, and we shall see that some of this derives from the responses to these plays by veterans, as discussed below, while Shay has proposed that tragedy was a forum for healing traumatised veterans through a communalization of the trauma and reintegration into the *polis*.[36] However, my view is that, while the ancients did acknowledge the cruelties of war, especially to non-combatants, the case for PTSD suffered by ancients is not proven. In what follows I will at key points distinguish my emotion-based argument from the view that epic literature and tragedy were a coded means of treating PTSD.

PTSD's basis has also been shifting, moving from the battlefield to beyond, affecting servicemen and women not actually involved in combat. In many reiterations of the trauma, the *physiological* basis for the syndrome is abandoned in favour of a *psychological* explanation involving the betrayal of trust and its impact. Even Shay agrees that many of the mal-adaptations to civilian life do not last a whole lifetime, which would fit in with the fact that illness and injury usually resolve themselves semi-spontaneously over time: "About a third of all people in actual combat will have long-lasting psychological consequences."[37] However "The fact is that once the capacity for social

[34] Cardeña, Etzel and Ustinova, Yulia 2014.
[35] Meineck 2016: 184.
[36] Shay 1994: 230. Meineck, Doerries and Tritle all adopt this view.
[37] Shay 2010: 51.

trust has been destroyed, once the injury has invaded good character, any possibility of a flourishing human life is lost."[38] This is *moral injury*—that is, leadership betrayals destroy social trust and this triggers violence: Achilles was betrayed by Agamemnon and the Greek warlords, and the death of Patroclus drives him into the rage for violent revenge. In Shay's retelling, it is grief for the murdered comrade that pushes soldiers over the edge. He attributes atrocities in war to failures of leadership and the desire to "just want to rain down destruction – just kill, kill, kill, destroy. It's not a practical military thing; it's just a personal berserking that seems to leave a physiological imprint that can be triggered years later, and repeatedly."[39] I return to this point later in this chapter.

A further shift in meanings related to PTSD widens the category of moral injury from leadership betrayal to complicity with morally questionable acts: both Doerries and Meineck use this term to refer to the reality of soldiers being forced to observe or take part in actions that violate their moral consciences, especially in "asymmetrical, counter-insurgency-based warfare… Moral injury may, in fact, be the signature wound of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan… Betrayal might just be the wound that cuts the deepest."[40] Again, Shay's pioneering use of the term 'moral injury' has been adopted, taken further,[41] and dramatized in staged readings and theatre performances as discussed below and in the next chapter: in these readings, Ajax suffers combat trauma over a prolonged period prior to the events in the play, as well as moral injury through the loss of the arms and the betrayal by Agamemnon and the other Greek leaders.

6.3.1 Staging vs theatre: the process

[38] Ibid. 49.
[39] Ibid. 54-5.
[40] Doerries 2015a: 104.
[41] Guntzel 2013.

Staged readings of the *Ajax* are deliberately designed not to be theatrical performances: actors read excerpts from the play in front of an audience, usually but not always an invited audience, and this is followed by a panel discussion and audience participation. There are no props, lights are left on, actors sit or stand, and speak to the audience; they often read directly from the script.[42] The reasons Doerries chose not to perform the plays theatrically, and in their entirety, are linked both to his purpose and the role of the theatre in "main street America". Though a classicist by training, he wanted to distance the readings from a particular "cultural baggage and pretension" associated with Greek tragedy.[43] Since theatre in America is attended by only one in ten Americans, staging the tragedies would not reach the military cohort Doerries wished to access.[44] In addition, theatre was concerned more with artistic ends, but the staged readings are means, rather than ends: "Tragedies don't *mean* anything. They *do* something."[45] The *doing* for Doerries is the creation of a particular impact on service personnel and their families, promoted by the process of introduction of the play, reading aloud of extracts, followed by discussion between panellists and audience members.

Any theatrical elements are to be found in the manner of delivery of the words: spoken with feeling and a wide range of vocal expressions, but very fast. Intensity of emotional expression and speed of delivery are directed to create "That sense of overwhelming and unfolding emergency and helplessness (which) is critical to achieving a shared discomfort."[46] The purpose of the dramatised readings is to evoke powerful feelings and then to instigate conversations "that would be as potentially charged and powerful as the actors' performances…Performances were "catalysts for discussions that

[42] Excerpts may be viewed at http://www.outsidethewirellc.com/projects/theater-of-war/overview and http://youstories.com/resources/detail/clip-the-dilemma-of-war--the-story-of-ajax
[43] Doerries 2015a: 74.
[44] Sandhu 2015 Interview with Doerries in the *Guardian.*
[45] Doerries 2015b: 14.
[46] Sandhu 2015.

otherwise would never have occurred. The readings and discussions are one interdependent thing."[47] This is not theatre but a form of group therapy.

6.3.2 The audience

Doerries' interest in *Ajax* was triggered with a publication on 13 January 2008 of an article in the *New York Times*[48] describing murders and other crimes committed by returning soldiers, in which *Ajax* was raised as a point of comparison. The murder victims were predominantly family, and arguably bear a closer resemblance to the *Heracles* of Euripides, but it was *Ajax* that Doerries decided to put on as a staged reading: "On every page of the article, on every paragraph, was written the story of Ajax."[49]

In that first reading, the characteristics that often make the *Ajax* difficult for modern audiences – the protagonist's visceral rage, desire for revenge, hatred of commanders, sense of betrayal and suicidal impulse – were the very elements the audience of soldiers comprehended most easily and identified with almost immediately. The reading was welcomed with an ovation and followed by discussions in which members of the audience responded with their personal stories echoing the story of Ajax. The success of this was such that over time, the US armed forces invited Doerries to stage the readings for larger numbers: 30,000 per performance.[50] Doerries objected, preferring smaller numbers "in order to create a safe intimate environment for soldiers to speak openly and without fear of retribution".[51] The compromise was to perform one hundred performances over twelve months on military installations throughout the world, for 200 to 500 service members per performance. Thus began Doerries' "resurrection" of an ancient general and his healing message.

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[47] Dorries 2015a: 74.
[48] Sontag and Alvarez 2008 'Across America: Deadly Echoes of Foreign Battles'.
[49] Doerries 2015b:5.
[50] In 2009, the Pentagon funded the project to the amount of USD3.7 million, reported in Sandhu.
[51] Doerries 2015a: 109.

The resurrection of Sophocles or of Ajax (it is difficult to say which since the two are often conflated), is brought about in different ways. Often, the ancient elements are described in modern terms, and modern concepts read back into the ancient material. The panellists who discuss the speeches after the readings serve the role of the ancient Greek chorus, as "intermediaries between the play and the audience",[52] opening up the discussion and interpreting the play at the same time. But the role of chorus could also be played by a member of the audience. At the first reading of the *Ajax,* the betrayal of the generals as voiced by Ajax resounded strongly with the audience. The sergeant major who summarized the position became "the chorus leader, bridging the world of the play with the world of the audience".[53]

Generals were present in the audience of that first reading, during which the question of leadership was voiced. This prompts the comment from Doerries: "I saw first-hand that these ancient plays possess the power to disrupt rigid hierarchies, at least temporarily, and to give warriors of all ranks permission to bear witness to the truth of the experience of war."[54] The ancient Athenian audience would also have included the generals, who led the ceremonies and sacrifices which opened the Dionysia. But, given that fifth-century Athenians were able to hold their generals and government officials to account in the assembly and courts, while lampooning them in comedy, any disruption of hierarchies is perhaps more urgent in the American military context.

Doerries is explicit in his desire to "deliver the plays in their purest, most efficacious form while leaving room for the Marines and their spouses to project their memories upon myths from the Trojan War."[55] Ancient tragedy and myth are explicitly summoned to serve contemporary mental health concerns by using contemporary

[52] Ibid. 83.
[53] Ibid. 87.
[54] Ibid. 88.
[55] Ibid. 74.

language and terms, reflecting contemporary anxieties, and thereby shaping the responses elicited from the audience. In Doerries' telling, Ajax is the "story of a highly decorated warrior, who after losing his friend in battle and being betrayed by his command, slides into a depression, goes on a killing spree and takes his own life in shame."[56] The chapter titled "American Ajax" begins with an elaborate reconstruction of the back story, cast in contemporary terms: the death of Achilles is experienced by Ajax as the breaking of a close brotherly bond, while the ten long years of war have pushed Ajax into depression. The award of the arms and its injustice work on unresolved grief. They are the final straw precipitating the frenzy of butchery and eventual suicide.

Accordingly, the language, especially in the introduction and context-setting to the reading, is emphatically contemporary. As he explained in the *Guardian* interview: "You'll hear idioms that are wholly different from the Greek. Where Ajax is described as sitting inside his tent with his mind like 'a ship on a tempestuous sea', I totally throw out the nautical metaphor. I have 1,000 marines to reach. So I say he sits 'inside the tent shellshocked, glazed over, looking into oblivion. He has a thousand-yard stare'."[57]

Only excerpts are read. The rest of the play is summarized. The extracts read are mainly Ajax's song and speech starting from his second entrance at 348 when he laments his state, through to the deception speech and his final speech before the suicide. But the readings are addressed to the audience, rather than to the characters within the play, and therefore take on different meanings and emphasis. For example, Ajax's address to his men:

> σέ τοι σέ τοι μόνον δέδορκα πημονὰν ἐπαρκέσοντ':
> ἀλλά με συνδάϊξον.(359-61)

[56] Doerries 2015b: xii.
[57] Sandhu 2015.

you, you are the only guardians I see who will help me! Come, kill me with the rest!

is translated into "I speak to those who understand!" Spoken directly to an audience of servicemen and veterans, these words connect powerfully, and are often mentioned in the post-reading discussion. However, as I point out in Chapter Three, the chorus within the play fail Ajax, rejecting his cries for understanding and turning away from him, exacerbating the crisis.

In a second example, Doerries' Ajax says at the end: "But I shall miss / the light of day / and the sacred / fields of Salamis, /where I played as / a boy, and great / Athens, and all / my friends." Sophocles' Ajax, estranged from all humanity, addresses his farewells to the landscape in substitution of a human audience. These differences, while prompting discussions within a group at greater risk of suicide, in my view detract from the whole depiction of the suicide crisis within the play. In the same way, by reading only excerpts, and not experiencing the play in its entirety, the full genius of the Sophoclean construction is missed, as well as the nuanced characterization of Ajax. The staged reading also usually omits elements unique to the fifth century Athenian context: Ajax's dying curse is often left out.

Many of the veterans in the audience connected powerfully with the language of violence, and the suicidal crisis, and mapped their experiences onto those of Ajax directly. Speaking of one couple, Doerries says: "By recognizing themselves in the actions and behaviors of Ajax and Tecmessa, they seemed to gain much-needed perspective-a longer view, so to speak, of their own private struggles…The story belonged to them."[58] The wife in that couple saw herself in Tecmessa, and her embarrassment at admitting her husband's breakdown ends, enabling her to speak up.[59] Shame and stigma are reduced:

[58] Doerries 2015a: 120.
[59] Ibid. 143.

"the performances gave them permission to say things they had never spoken aloud, not even to each other in private".[60] In addition, for the couple's children, the performances "had eliminated the shame and the silence that surrounds mental health issues in military culture".[61]

Doerries sees the overwhelming veteran response as proof of Sophocles having "something profound and timeless to say about the experience of war", for "at the center of the tragedy is the suicide of a combat veteran".[62] There is circular thinking here: response to a series of adapted excerpts in modern English of a Greek play forms the basis of an interpretation that reads that response into the ancient material, without taking into account differences in context and culture.

6.3.3 The Felt Experience of Suicide

Doerries does not discuss the research findings or scholarship on suicide in his book. Suicide among veterans has been reported on widely in the U.S. media, especially the Department of Veterans Affairs study of 2012 which said an estimated 22 veterans committed suicide every day in 2010.[63] Hence the ability of Sophocles' depiction of suicide to speak to the veteran community for "at the center of the tragedy is the suicide of a combat veteran" and a journey inside "the mind of a person who is actively contemplating suicide, deep inside the insidious logic that leads him to end his own life".[64] "By depicting the innermost thoughts of an ancient warrior who is in the throes of suicidal thoughts, thereby humanizing his ambivalence and articulating his despair, Sophocles' *Ajax* provides a clear perspective on the internal struggles of service members

[60] Ibid. 145.
[61] Ibid. 147.
[62] Ibid. 96.
[63] https://www.va.gov/opa/docs/suicide-data-report-2012-final.pdf
[64] Doerries 2015a: 96.

and veterans today."[65] Certainly, service personnel in the audiences of the staged readings identified with the ambivalence and internal struggle: one soldier says Ajax was *thinking* of killing himself during the deception speech but only *knew* he would do so when he was "alone on the sand dune with his gods".[66] For Doerries, "I think the operative word is *alone*. In how many ways, intentionally and unintentionally, do we leave soldiers like Ajax alone to do battle with their darkest thoughts and memories?"[67] Again, this reflects the language of the play where the term 'alone', *monos*, is heard throughout. Isolation is a key commonality to suicide, as discussed in Chapter Three and dramatized by Sophocles.

This is not to deny that suicidal impulses can arise out of war trauma, and the statistics indicate that suicide is a significant issue for the military. As I discuss in Chapter Three, the depiction of the suicidal state in the *Ajax* is masterly and deserves awareness and understanding, but that state need not belong *only* to the sufferer of battle trauma. I argue that Sophocles develops the suicide of Ajax in the form of a supreme crisis involving humiliation, loss of status and meaning, narrowing of options, thwarted desires, vengeance and conscious choice. Seen in the ancient context, the ancient battleground was not necessarily a source of trauma to the ancient warriors but instead, in the words of Crowley, a field of bonding.[68] The loss of that bond becomes hugely traumatic, but the act of suicide is not a direct consequence of the trauma of battle as such. Just as the majority of veterans do not develop symptoms of PTSD, the act of suicide is not exclusive to Ajax *the combat veteran*, even while suicide is the definitive act of Ajax, the iconic suicide.

[65] Ibid. 98.
[66] Ibid. 101.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Crowley 2014.

Even in the U.S., where the latest statistics record rising rates of suicide across almost every state between 1999 and 2016, and report nearly 45,000 lives lost in 2016,[69] researchers found that more than half of people who died by suicide did *not* have a known diagnosed mental health condition at the time of death. Instead, relationship problems or loss, substance misuse, physical health problems, and job, money, legal or housing stress often contributed to risk for suicide.

6.3.4 Therapy and theatre

The staged readings and discussions allow for experiences to be spoken, shared and validated. In a session put on specifically for spouses of service personnel, the reading did not end with the suicide as it normally did when staged for serving personnel and veterans, but continues to the end of the play, eliciting powerful emotions in those present. In the words of the general present: "the reading was "a way for our soldiers and families to communicate and talk about issues to build resilience so they don't take that final step of taking their own life…"[70] The staged reading was a way into allowing the unspeakable to be spoken and the barriers to come down. In typical American fashion, Doerries is often asked where the hope lies in the tragedies staged, and answers that "The hope is not in the plays but in the people who come together to bear witness to their truth. If these ancient tragedies can teach us anything today, it's how to listen to one another without judgment, how to grow from our experiences and mistakes, and how to heal as one community."[71]

The sharing permits healing by reducing the isolation of individuals and promoting connection: people are "healed by the realization that they are not alone in

[69] https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/suicide/

[70] Doerries 2015a: 150-1.

[71] Ibid. 258.

their communities, not alone in the world, and not alone across time".[72] Theater of War has put on contemporary plays as well as ancient tragedies, but all are "distant enough…by way of culture or time, to create a safe space for open dialogue".[73] But if the distance allows dialogue, it also preserves and even normalizes the experience of war by foregrounding it as timeless. For Doerries is emphatic that the power of the play is the timelessness of its vision: "From Sophocles' searing portrait of Ajax – a warrior struggling with the invisible wounds of war – it seems clear that psychological injury, what is now called PTSD, was a persistent issue for warriors twenty-five hundred years ago."[74]

This connection between ancient and modern is insistently made by Doerries, Meineck, Tritle and Shay. In a *New York Times* 2008 article,[75] Doerries says "A modern play about Vietnam wouldn't have the effect of an ancient narrative that draws attention to the fact that PTSD, even if it wasn't called that, was very much a problem that plagued humanity from way back." He goes further: "Tragedy is an ancient military technology, a form of story-telling that evokes powerful emotions in order to erode stigmas, elicit empathy, generate dialogue, and stir citizens to action. When you plug a tragedy into a community that is ready to receive it, the story does what it was designed to do."[76] This exceeds anything indicated in the historical evidence and does not account for the popularity of the plays after the fifth century had passed, unless it is surmised that every subsequent audience was also composed of veterans. In my approach, Sophocles' *Ajax* has captured the psychological state of a man to whom suicide appears the only way out of an impossible situation while the emotionalism of its poetry and staging move

[72] Ibid. 262.
[73] Ibid. 266.
[74] Doerries 2015b: 6.
[75] Haberman 2008.
[76] Doerries 2015b: xiii.

audiences to empathise with the protagonist. This is different from claiming that tragedy is a forum for healing traumatized soldiers.

Building resilience is part of Theater of War's engagement with American soldiers, and one that the Pentagon sees fit to fund; Doerries himself admits he is often accused of being a war propagandist for the Pentagon.[77] Theater of War's staged reading of the *Ajax* has been performed in the Pentagon.[78] It would have been fascinating to have witnessed this and compared its reception to the performance of Peter Sellars' seminal play of 1986. This is where theatre and staged readings diverge. Theatre can be radical, subversive, critical, in contrast to therapy which is healing, humanistic, ends-driven. In Chapter Five, we looked at the consciously political version by Sellars, an emphatic staging of *Ajax* as anti-war, even while retaining a larger-than-life, epic Ajax. In contrast, staged readings of excerpts of the *Ajax* in the American context become an educational and mental health tool, a form of understanding from *within* the veteran experience in a culture that normally suppresses these issues.

6.3.5 A *Female* Ajax?

Lodewyck and Monoson,[79] in their discussion of staged readings, describe a Theater of War reading they attended where Ajax was a woman. The female veterans present could read their experience of soldiering in the words and emotions of the protagonist but expressed "great irritation" and "stinging disappointment" with the absence of mention of sex-related belittling, sexual violence and abuse inflicted by fellow soldiers and the stigmas faced by female soldiers generally.[80] Powerful discussions were triggered in the post-reading discussions. Sexual violence in the U.S. army has been an issue for decades,

[77] Sandhu 2015.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Lodewyck and Monoson 2015.
[80] Ibid. 659-60.

and it appears the staged reading was a valuable forum for that, even as the current 'Me-Too' movement continues to raise awareness of sexual harassment and abuse in different professions and settings. In Chapter Eight I will look at Ellen McLoughlin's *Ajax in Iraq*, which rather than introducing a female Ajax, combines Sophocles' Ajax and a woman soldier suffering sexual abuse.

6.3.6 An *American* Ajax?

I argued in Chapter Three that tragic drama's powerful emotionalism ensured its popularity both during and after the fifth century. Accordingly, the other goals attributed to it by Doerries above (a wish to erode stigmas, elicit empathy for veterans, generate dialogue, and stir citizens to action) appear to serve the parochial concerns of the American situation. Quintessentially American elements appear in the responses to the staged readings. Many of the veterans come from military families and grow up hearing stories about all the "grandiose, awesome, dreamland stuff that military people do".[81] Veterans who join Doerries in promoting the readings are called "evangelists", Doerries terms himself an evangelist for classical literature, and the sessions themselves take on an evangelist fervour: they are often described "in revivalist terms or as conversion experiences."[82]

Lauriola, in a detailed study of these staged readings based on Shay and Tritle, suggests that they depart from strict pedagogical standards, and are receptions based on personal reflections. They consist of analogies to personal experiences, or re-readings through personal lenses, in order to assist a particular section of the American population. Troubled by the degree of subjectivity in the reading, though grateful for the light shone on

[81] Dorries 2015a: 121.
[82] Sandhu 2015.

the "darker dimensions of war", she asks, "How can we be sure we are not forcing the sources to make them suitable for a modern reception?"[83]

In post-reading discussions, the audience, when asked to speculate on Sophocles' motives in writing the play, answer: "enlighten the community to the atrocities of war", "discuss the cost of heroism", "boost morale" "because it's the truth" and "address the responsibility of civilians to carry the military".[84] Again these seem typically American, not ancient Athenian, where citizens were soldiers, and war and war-making part of the fabric of the polis. Addressing the audience at the end of a session, Doerries says: "Know that you are not alone, in this room, in this country, across time."[85] More, he tells veterans that they have "lived lives of mythological proportions" and that they have something important to say in response to the plays.[86] This is simultaneously to elevate the modern combatant, conflating him with the myth and the text, making insistent and hubristic comparisons with the myth.

Konstan referred to "the pervasive glorification of militarism" in the ancient world as possibly preventing the identification of PTSD. I suggest that the elevation of combatants to status of mythological heroes becomes another glorification in the American context, where the military is almost the only institution that commands universal respect in today's America.[87] Interrogating this insistence on the so-called universal experience of PTSD could raise important questions for the character of the U.S. military and the history of violence generally in that country.

One answer could be explored through American, rather than ancient Greek, myth-making. Richard Slotkin, in his magisterial trilogy on American myths,[88]

[83] Lauriola 2014a: 49.
[84] Klein 2017: 160-1.
[85] Ibid. 161.
[86] Ibid. 155.
[87] https://www.upi.com/Poll-Americans-most-confident-in-US-military-of-all-institutions/3511501158451/
[88] Slotkin 1973, 1985, 1992.

Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, The Fatal Environment: the Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890 and *Gunfighter Nation: the Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-century America* has characterized the American myth as overwhelmingly one of the frontiersman – extending the border, contending with Indians and Mexicans – but always through violence. Violence is the paradoxical means of both assimilating the other as well as mastering him and regenerating oneself thereby. The myth of the founding fathers is "essentially artificial and typically American: they believed, in effect, that a mythology could be put together on the ground, like the governments of frontier communities or the national Constitution…such myth-epics would reflect the most progressive ideas of American man…"[89] Instead, "True myths are generated on a subliterary level by the historical experience of a people"; in this case "the rogues, adventurers and land-boomers; the Indian fighters, traders, missionaries, explorers, and hunters who killed and were killed"[90] contained above all in the myth of the frontier "the conception of America as a wide-open land of unlimited opportunity for the strong, ambitious, self-reliant individual to thrust his way to the top…the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience."[91]

That frontier's quintessential hero was the hunter, and "The hunter myth provided a fictive justification for the process by which the wilderness was to be expropriated and exploited. It did so by seeing that process in terms of heroic adventure, of the initiation of a hero into a new way of life and a higher state of being."[92] "The myth of the hunter … is one of self-renewal or self-creation through acts of violence. What becomes of the new self, once the initiatory hunt is over? If the good life is defined in terms of the hunter

[89] Slotkin 1973: 3.
[90] Ibid 4.
[91] Ibid. 5.
[92] Ibid. 554.

myth, there is only another hunt succeeding the first one."[93] The social upward-mobility myth of the Americans is a manifestation of this same hunter myth and permits the destruction of the land and peoples in its pursuit. "The archetypal enemy of the American hero is the Red Indian, and to some degree all groups or nations which threaten us are seen in terms derived from our early myths."[94] Rebellious urban blacks, hippies, the whole history of southern segregation based on hunter and captive myths are echoed in American imperialistic adventures: through the Indian and Mexican wars, the Spanish-American War right through to Vietnam. In words that are prescient of the Islamophobia that succeeded 9/11, Slotkin notes that the myth never ends, and new enemies must arise: there will be "a new Indian, a new social or political antithesis…rescue from dark events is never complete. Physical combat with and captivity to the dark forces (whether they are really dark or only imagined to be so) infects the mind itself with darkness…A new captivity, a new hunt, and a new ceremony of exorcism repeat the myth-scenario on progressively deeper, more internal levels. Wars are followed by witch-hunts. Moby Dick is both a creature of external reality and as aspect of his hunters' minds." Slotkin ends by quoting Tacitus: "It has been said that "men make a waste land and call it peace"; and the desert is not simply that of a savaged landscape but of a tortured mind."[95]

In the previous chapter I looked at how Sellars' production of the *Ajax* interrogated this American myth in powerfully dramatic ways: what new wars will be fought, and what manner of honour will be invoked by its heroes? In contrast, the staged readings subsume European heritage myths to the American experience, making war and the violence of war a universal activity and failing to examine uniquely American myth-making around war and violence.

[93] Ibid. 556.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid. 564.

Lodewyck and Monoson report on these staged readings of Greek drama as part of the "urgent public discourse about war"[96] and as experiments with ancient plays that they claim do not make "partisan statements"[97] about American foreign policy (Sellars' production of the *Ajax* was definitely partisan), but instead engage experience of deployment, battle and homecoming for an American audience. They argue that these experiments democratize Greek drama in multiple ways: reaching new audiences distinct from a theatre-going elite, mobilizing new interpretations to address "unseen or neglected public interests",[98] "occasion public discourse and moments of commonality"[99] and contributing to a "plurality of public spheres in the American polity".[100] "Ideally" these initiatives create empathy and "perhaps even initiates action that will continue outside the room".[101] However, interrogating these statements simply raises more questions, for example, why are these public interests unseen or neglected? How does calling them *universal* experiences keep them unseen and neglected? Why are moments of commonality between the professionalized volunteer army and the broader community so few, given the huge reverence for the flag and the armed forces in the U.S.? Why is empathy lacking for the men and women making up the most respected institution in America today?

Lodewyck and Monoson say these performances "have great political import" for bridging the "widening gap between the experiences of military personnel and the general public"[102] and the "ever-widening gap between military and civilian society".[103] I suggest that the reasons for this "ever-widening gap" would be better addressed in its American context rather than eliding an ancient model in which no such

[96] Lodewyck and Monoson 2015: 651.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid. 652.
[99] Ibid.
[100] Ibid. 658.
[101] Ibid. 659.
[102] Ibid. 655.
[103] Ibid. 667.

gap existed and for which theatre served religious and civic purposes within a large range of themes and plotlines. In addition, deforming the play, cutting it up, extracting bits and pieces and fitting it into a new narrative that bears little resemblance to the original work experienced in its totality, detracts from the whole. If experienced in its totality, the play makes sense from the suicide point of view. Reading it insistently as a record of PTSD restricts it to a message about the trauma of war.

Interpreting art and drama through the prism of trauma is an accelerating trend. *Macbeth* is another play that has been interpreted in this manner, for example, in the 2015 film directed by Justin Kurzel. However, PTSD strips agency from protagonists, changing choice and decision into mental disorder and a concomitantly diminished vision of the tragic hero. Sophocles' Ajax chooses and acts, Shakespeare's Macbeth chooses and acts, and both are redeemed by their very human reckoning with these choices and reiteration of the human condition rendered in brilliant poetry. These extremely flawed human beings give us critical insights into violence, thwarted ambition, self-destructive behaviour, and these insights into self and other raise their protagonists above purely medical labels and diagnoses.

Within the armed forces, similar objections to the use of the PTSD label have been made, with some veterans pushing back against being cast as victims and not agents. Regarding themselves as professionals, similar to police, fire fighters and medical staff, trained for specific fields, they "do not normally perceive themselves as victims, nor their reactions as pathological".[104] Horwitz and Wakefield propose that, instead of labels, recognizing that since lengthy training for combat requires an equally lengthy process to undo the same training, providing practical assistance to veterans to re-integrate into civilian life would be more helpful.

[104] Horwitz and Wakefield 2012: 187 quoting Hoge in the *Journal of the American Medical Association.*

As mentioned earlier, Horwitz and Wakefield attribute this morally charged conflict to the genesis of the syndrome: "This conflict stems from the unique status of the PTSD diagnosis, which displaces blame for psychological distress from victims to circumstances or people that are held responsible for the traumatic event. By rooting symptoms in a cause external to sufferers, PTSD can deflect blame from the individual, lead to therapeutic help, and (often) bring monetary compensation and other rewards."[105] As an editorial in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* put it: "It is rare to find a psychiatric diagnosis that anyone likes to have, but PTSD seems to be one of them."[106]

Notwithstanding increasing levels of awareness and resources committed to the treatment and prevention of suicide, as mentioned above, suicide rates have gone up in the US, and rates of PTSD remain high. Even more troubling, service personnel operating drones to kill and destroy from thousands of miles away are being diagnosed with PTSD and moral injury.[107] If the act of killing, even if distanced and sanitized, is sufficient to cause trauma in perpetrators, then this raises urgent questions around the nature of war itself and its capacity to cause trauma. Shay himself has said, "The primary prevention of combat trauma is the elimination of the human practice of war."[108] In *Achilles in Vietnam* after pointing out that "We have achieved a species-wide moral consensus on the subject of slavery, arguably the first component of a species ethic" he pleaded for a new species ethic against war .[109]

6.4 Moral Injury and Just War

The logical conclusion of the issue of moral injury then is the pressing necessity to address the question of the morality of war. Robert Meagher, in his 2014 *Killing from the Inside*

[105] Ibid. 188.
[106] Andreasen 1995.
[107] Press 2018.
[108] Shay 2010: 52.
[109] Shay 1994: 206.

Out: Moral Injury and Just War defines moral injury as the transgression or violation of what is right, what is held to be sacred – a core belief or moral code – and as the wounding or mortally wounding of the psyche, soul, or one's humanity. He proposes that "The truth is that a great many combat veterans, having followed all the rules, are haunted more by what they have done than by what they have endured in war…the deepest and most intractable PTSD has its roots in what veterans perceive as the evil they have done and been a part of. They all too often see themselves as criminals, not because they have committed war crimes but because they have become convinced by their own experience of the essential criminality of war. Needless to say this is a conviction that neither the military nor the government is prepared to hear and take seriously."[110]

Meagher, a classicist, traces the genesis of the 'just war' doctrine in war. In Shay's words (he is an adviser to the U.S. armed forces) "Just War Doctrine has become as American as apple pie. It spells out their patriotism of 'For God and Country.'"[111] The early Christian church upheld the teachings of Jesus that forbade killing and enjoined love. But just as self-killing forced a re-think of church doctrine as described in Chapter Four, the triumph of Christianity required the church to "bend their minds anew around the question of war and killing" and come up with moral and theological justifications for both. For Ambrose and Augustine, this meant going back to the Old Testament for the licence given by the older tradition to wage wars in God's name. Next, these church fathers ignored Jesus' pacifist teachings by transforming them into allegory using Paul's pronouncement that "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life". Actions are opposed to intention or inward disposition: the latter is what God alone sees, and it is what God sees that matters. "What ultimately determines whether killing is evil, that is, sinful, is the intent and inner disposition of the killer. It is not the taking of life that is sinful."[112] In

[110] Meagher 2014: 2.
[111] Afterword to Meagher 2014: 151.
[112] Meagher 2014: 76.

Augustine's *Reply to Faustus* 22.74, he says, "the real evils in war are love of violence, revengeful cruelty, fierce and implacable enmity, wild resistance, and the lust for power and such like".[113]

Killing or physical punishment or even torture are therefore justified so long as these acts are guided by the right intention and performed in love, rather than in one or other dark personal passion, such as hatred, rage, or revenge. Killing became not a moral issue, but a simple necessity in a violent world. Violence can be good or it can be evil. The same act can be performed with a rightful intent and a pure heart, or may, instead be undertaken with a wrongful intent and accompanied by dark passions that poison the soul.

As furthered developed in the twelfth century in *Summa Theologica* by Thomas Aquinas, three things are needed for just war: declaration of war by a legitimate sovereign authority for the sake of a just cause (avenging a wrong, recovering what is taken) and always with a right intention, for example, for the sake of peace, punishing evil and uplifting the good. But there have been few wars that are not justified by the combatants involved and their leaders.

Shay, Doerries and Meineck wish to see healing the trauma of individual soldiers through the "communalization" of storytelling. But with moral injury among service personnel on the rise, "it is today's combat veterans who are bringing the greatest clarity to the moral cost of any war."[114] Meagher suggests that bringing the lessons of war to the broader community requires an abandonment of the professional army and a re-introduction of a citizen army. This suggestion is echoed by veterans, such as Phil Klay: writing in the *Atlantic* in an article explaining that 'Two Decades of War have eroded the morale of America's Troops' after seventeen years of fighting starting in 2001, he regrets the lack of public debate around these wars, of any wider policy beyond military power

[113] Quoted in Meagher 2014: 76.
[114] Meagher 2014: 141.

and wishes for the reinstatement of the draft so that these issues are brought directly into the community.[115]

In this regard, I find troubling the 'censorship' of Sophocles as reported by classicists Adamitis and Gamel who report that at a staged reading of the *Ajax* by Theater of War they attended: "Doerries explicitly discouraged audience members from voicing anti-war sentiments (apparently as requested by the Pentagon)."[116] They go on to point out that "Such censorship is ironic, since Sophocles has Ajax's men denounce 'the neverending disaster of soldiers' toils' at *Aj.* 1186."[117] Helen Morales in a review of Doerries' book *Theater of War* in the *TLS* makes a related point: "One problem with [Doerries'] approach [to validating the distress of the audience] is that political responses to Greek tragedy, especially those that criticize the US government and its institutions, remain underdeveloped by Doerries and his audiences. This is untrue to the spirit of Greek tragedy, but perhaps to do otherwise would be to jeopardize the project's funding."[118] Greek tragedy in general and Sophocles in particular permit a plurality of voices which are given their place in a performance of the whole, but which are lost when the play's excerpts only permit one or two voices to be heard. This is not too far from the aphorisms extracted from the plays by scholars in antiquity for their own didactic purposes as described in Chapter Four.

6.5 Summary

Lorna Hardwick, in a consideration of staged readings, notes that "Anyone would welcome ways of enabling fellow human beings traumatized by war to come to terms with their experiences."[119] But she hopes to see future research answering several

[115] Klay 2018.
[116] Adamitis and Gamel 2013: 296.
[117] Ibid.
[118] Morales 2016.
[119] Hardwick 2013: 21.

questions, including "To what extent will Meineck's project and other programmes aimed at veterans reflect or shape a cultural shift in attitudes to the military and the masculinities embodied in its philosophies, ideologies, and practices?"[120] and "Will the association of tragedy with modern therapies privilege a bland interpretation of its cathartic functions, focusing on the traumatized individual rather than the *traumatized society*?"[121] (My italics.)

This chapter was re-written after a five-month period of working in Houston, Texas in 2016 and a subsequent assignment in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), Vietnam beginning in 2017 where I currently reside and work. These periods of residence in the countries of the two warring sides to the Vietnam War, the war that underlay the genesis of PTSD, and which continues to bedevil the interpretation and application of the syndrome, has affected my interpretations and sympathies. A visit to the War Remnants museum in HCMC is an education into the atrocities of war. The official investigations into the My Lai massacre suggest no 'fog of war' or 'heat of battle', no 'berserking' in the manner of Achilles' *aristeia* in the *Iliad*, but deliberate murder.[122] The few courageous soldiers who spoke up have been victimized since then.[123] Worse, My Lai was not an aberration but an operation, permitted, even encouraged by American military policies, murder prompted by deeply engrained racism and contempt for the Vietnamese.[124] A more persuasive description and motivation of battlefield atrocities comes across in the

[120] Ibid. 22.
[121] Ibid.
[122] See Hastings 2018 for a summary.
[123] Ibid. Hastings also condemns the civilian support for atrocities instead of empathising with the victims. See also http://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-39567002/my-lai-massacre-hero-hugh-thompson-on-being-shunned
[124] Turse 2013. The devastating effects of the war on Vietnam described here and in multiple sources – chemical warfare, artillery and aerial bombardment, search and destroy operations, casualties between two to three million Vietnamese - call to mind Tacitus' on the deserts of war.

testimony of another Vietnam veteran, although it makes for horrific reading.[125] The pleasures of war for the combatant described there go beyond PTSD into choice and desire, into atrocities and moral injury, and the concomitant need for rules of war and the protection of non-combatants and communities. I return to this issue in my final chapter in looking at two performance interpretations of the madness in the *Ajax*.

In summary, my view is that PTSD is a real and harrowing syndrome that applies to present-day combatants owing to both physiological effects from modern armaments, and to socio-cultural factors. The case that it applied to combatants in fifth-century Greece is not proven, and the insistence of the proponents of this view mostly derive from the contested origins of this syndrome in the aftermath of the Vietnam war. Suicide is a high risk factor for sufferers of PTSD and programmes that aim to help and heal are to be welcomed, even as wider socio-political issues should not be neglected. Excerpts in staged readings focus on the suicide, play up the crisis and invite listeners to see Ajax as suffering from PTSD. But do *theatrical* performances of the play using this motif work? That will be the subject of my next chapter as I study interpretations of Ajax as a soldier traumatized by PTSD, particularly *Our Ajax* written by Timberlake Wertenbaker and performed in London in 2013.

[125] Broyles 2014, originally published in 1984.

Chapter 7

"Scrambled Minds": Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Ajax*

Before embarking on Wertenbaker's play, I look briefly at a version that used the theme of shellshock, and which underscores the difficulties in translating the protagonist's dilemma into a mental disorder: *Ajax* performed in 2009 by Love & Madness Ensemble, translated by Robert Cannon and directed by Jack Shepherd. Performed at Riverside Studios, Hammersmith, the action is set in a hospital tent during World War One: Athena is a nurse, the chorus a group of wounded soldiers, and Ajax and Odysseus are victims of shell shock.

The only review I found praised individual performances but felt that the production failed to connect the ancient play with the First World War context. While "the decision to supplant the action to the First World War is an understandable one" presumably for the shell shock parallels, "The lines of the chorus are awkward in the mouths of the soldiers, nurses and doctors in the hospital tent and there is no Great War equivalent"[1] for the hostility between Odysseus and Ajax. Shepherd's programme note stated that "he was aware of the potential 'anomalies', but that 'if Sophocles' play proved to be more comprehensible with a contemporary social resonance, then it might be worth taking the risk'. Unfortunately in this production that risk failed."[2]

An early version of Wertenbaker's *Our Ajax* originated in *The Women and War Project* run in 2010 by Peggy Shannon,[3] who set out to explore if the ancient tragedies could "offer a lens to view and consider the contemporary female and her engagement with war", whether they would "yield recognition and catharsis for women", whether "male characters carrying themes of war trauma become surrogates for modern

[1] Caird 2009.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Shannon 2015.

women" and "Might *female* characters serve to animate war trauma and war-related roles for women?" Naming Shay as a significant influence in the treatment of war-induced trauma, Shannon assembled an international team of theatre practitioners, playwrights, scholars, mental health researchers and military personnel to create new performances with the focus on the female point of view and the female experience "understood globally". The three plays commissioned were adaptations of ancient Greek plays chosen to "provoke ethical and moral questions regarding women and war" and were well received. *Our Ajax* thus began as *Ajax in Afghanistan* and was conceived specifically to examine the issue of PTSD. The three plays (*Electra, Iphigeneia in Aulis* in addition to *Ajax*) premiered in 2012 in Greece but *Our Ajax* was revised and rewritten for its 2013 London performance.

Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Ajax* premiered at Southwark Playhouse, London on 8 November 2013 and continued until 30 November 2013. Directed by David Mercatali, it starred Joe Dixon as Ajax, Gemma Chan as Athena, Adam Riches as Odysseus, Frances Ashman as Tecmessa, Oliver Devoti as the Company Sergeant Major (leader of the chorus in this production), James Kermack, Jordan Mifsud and Fiona Skinner as soldiers making up the chorus, John Schwab as Menelaos, William Postlethwaite as Teucer and Douglas Wood as the son of Ajax and Tecmessa.

This chapter will (7.1) first describe the background to the writing of the play, and the way that the syndrome of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) informs it. I will next (7.2) look at the production values of the performance as viewed on two occasions. Since this is a recent performance where live realization was absolutely crucial to the mind-related issues with which I am concerned, I shall once again provide a thick description of my experience of the play in performance, which I hope will prove useful to others researching Performance Reception of the reception of *Ajax* in the future. Textual changes which introduced significant differences between Sophocles' play and Wertenbaker's

will be highlighted and the implications of these for her vision of the play as conveyed in the performance. Next (7.3), the critical response to the production will be discussed, and the degree of its success as theatre within the meaning of the metaphors utilized in both text and performance. I will conclude (7.4) by evaluating the originality and importance of *Our Ajax* as an episode in the reception of Sophocles' tragedy particularly in its use of PTSD and the place of suicide within this adaptation.

7.1.1 Introduction to the text

The play script states that "*Our Ajax* was inspired by Sophocles' *Ajax* and borrows freely from it." In her Introduction,[4] Wertenbaker confesses that, reading Sophocles' play, she was unable to undertake her usual method of beginning with translating from the literal, and making a less literal version as she went along. Instead: "A new play was superimposing itself on the literal: contemporary, based on current wars, set in a British army base. The war in Afghanistan was dragging on and there were a lot of headlines about casualties – and suicides. *Ajax* became *Our Ajax*."[5]

Although I am discussing it as an episode in the history of the reception of Sophocles' *Ajax*, Wertenbaker herself does not regard her play as a translation of a work by another author, but as her own play. In an interview with M. F. Jones in *Exeunt Magazine*,[6] on being asked whether her play was adaptation or translation, Wertenbaker said, "It's difficult to say what it is…'inspired by'…'with free borrowing'…I've written my own play. I decided first to translate, but then I thought… it needed a different language." However, *Our Ajax* keeps the outline of Sophocles' plot, almost all of the characters and all the key speeches, more than justifying its study as an adaptation of Sophocles' *Ajax*.

[4] Wertenbaker 2013. All quotations from the play script are from this edition.
[5] Wertenbaker 2013: 5.
[6] Jones 2013.

In keeping with Wertenbaker's statement of the contemporaneity and modern-day relevance of her play, we expect, and receive, an updating to the immediate present. She makes extensive use of the 'intervention' by NATO forces in the civil war in Afghanistan, which has been continuing since 2001. She sets the action there, peoples the cast with figures from the US/UK alliance, and makes references to a range of acronyms applicable to that setting (e.g. AFN for the Afghan National Army, IEDs for Improvised Explosive Devices), and the coalition command structures, presupposing therefore the audience's familiarity with the war.

The *dramatis personae* are also transformed into plausible modern army counterparts. Ajax is a Lieutenant-Colonel in the British army which is fighting in coalition with American forces. Menelaos is an American General, Odysseus a recently promoted Brigadier General in the British forces. The chorus consists of soldiers under the command of Ajax, and Tecmessa is an army medic. The role of Agamemnon has been omitted.

7.1.2 War's Impact: Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

War trauma is key to this re-imagining of *Ajax*: Wertenbaker interviewed soldiers, veterans, military families and medical experts on PTSD and writes with great skill and empathy of the constellation of symptoms that afflict the sufferer from PTSD: incessant flashbacks, nightmares, hair trigger reactions, hyper-vigilance and heightened aggressiveness. Her Ajax palpably suffers from PTSD, as do the soldiers making up the chorus though to lesser degrees.

There is an enormous literature on PTSD and the wider topic of war trauma. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this disorder was formally named in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders III* in 1980 and has undergone revisions in subsequent editions. The current edition, DSM V

lists four major symptom clusters which may be triggered by a traumatic experience in any context, not necessarily in combat:

- Re-experiencing the event — For example, spontaneous memories of the traumatic event, recurrent dreams related to it, flashbacks or other intense or prolonged psychological distress.
- Heightened arousal — For example, aggressive, reckless or self-destructive behaviour, sleep disturbances, hyper- vigilance or related problems.
- Avoidance — For example, distressing memories, thoughts, feelings or external reminders of the event.
- Negative thoughts and mood or feelings — For example, feelings may vary from a persistent and distorted sense of blame of self or others, to estrangement from others or markedly diminished interest in activities, to an inability to remember key aspects of the event.

As we shall see, Wertenbaker's recasting of the sufferings of Ajax, and to a lesser extent his men, take on many of the above characteristics. Accordingly, the play is important in the performance reception of Sophocles' *Ajax* both because it is a direct response to an ongoing war, and because it is using the ancient myth to explore a contemporary – or at least only in recent times identified – psychological affliction. Yet while she makes excellent use of the dramatic devices and the language of Sophocles, the play often comes across as an uneasy amalgam of ancient and modern, with the fault lines clearly visible between them.

In *Our Ajax* the following classical elements, references and contexts are omitted: the arms of Achilles, the sword of Hector, and the Trojan War. Wertenbaker's Ajax has been cheated out of promotion, his feats of courage and calm under fire going unrecognized. In the *Exeunt* interview, when asked about the continuing relevance of the ideas behind Sophocles' play, Wertenbaker said, "For soldiers, things haven't changed

that much. When you talk to soldiers, they respond to that; they feel like they belong to a long line of heroes."[7] The ancient concept of *kleos* is recast as the desire for recognition and promotion. Wertenbaker accordingly makes the denial of promotion equivalent to the denial of the arms of Achilles as the trigger for the murderous rage that commences the action of the play. Given the time scale (that is, that the war has been dragging on for some ten years), Ajax has been suffering from trauma, and the denial of promotion has pushed him over the edge into madness and violence. However both madness and trauma have also been bestowed on him by Athena, goddess of war, and therefore personification of war. This makes for a dual motivation, moving back and forth between rage at dishonour, and the afflictions of PTSD. The difference in motivation is often signalled by the language as Wertenbaker retains direct English translations of Sophocles' language from key scenes: Ajax's self-lacerating grief on recovery from madness, the debate on his possible actions, the deception speech and the suicide speech. Passages on PTSD are grafted on to these. In her version then, war trauma and the denial of promotion are related, and as we shall see, Wertenbaker changes the structure of the play to suit this vision, making crucial additions and changes.

7.2 Performance

Staging (the set design was by James Turner) was kept simple yet effective. The large space in the Southwark Playhouse, in its new home in Elephant & Castle, is a thrust stage; benches were arranged on three sides. The entire floor, not just the stage area, was covered in sand, and around the back of the auditorium cages were topped by barbed wire, suggesting a desert encampment. The effect was somewhat claustrophobic, putting the audience in the midst of the action. Characters move from various points in the auditorium, and, during the search for Ajax, the chorus runs through the audience.

[7] Ibid.

At the back of the main staging area were tent curtains. These curtains subsequently opened to reveal the blood-soaked walls and floor of Ajax's tent and Ajax himself among the wreckage of the slaughtered animals. Sound effects were few yet effective: aircraft and war machines at the beginning contributed to the claustrophobic feel. Modern music and song accompanied some of the passages of the soldier chorus, especially when they rejoiced after Ajax's deception speech. Costumes were army fatigues, and a simple long gown for Athena.

Props reflecting a contemporary war included guns and grenades and the latest technological gadgets, such as smart phones and walkie-talkies. The play lacked the iconic symbol of Hector's sword: Ajax kills himself with a gunshot. The only other prop of note was a bundle of bloodied guts resembling a slaughtered animal, dragged in by Ajax at the play's opening. For, unlike Sophocles, Wertenbaker opens with Ajax himself, herding imaginary animals. This is a crazed, deluded, violent Ajax, in blood-soaked army fatigues, pulling a mutilated carcass behind him. He turns on the carcass in a frenzy of violence, both stabbing and subjecting it to water boarding, while mocking and cursing the generals and Odysseus as he does so. The performance is powerful: it drags the audience into the violence of madness and the acting out of hatred which have overwhelmed Ajax.

Despite having dispensed with the scene where Athena interrogates Ajax in the sight of Odysseus, palpably controlling the action, the power of Athena is maintained. Athena is a voice on Ajax's walkie-talkie: this "godgirl"[8] is pulling the strings. We meet her in the next scene with Odysseus and her role is one that Wertenbaker keeps and expands in the play. Again we have goddess and hero – Odysseus and Athena – in exposition of event and motivation. Athena is also explicitly the voice of war, as the goddess of war:

[8] Wertenbaker 2013: 12.

> "I'm the figure that makes clear puts them into words you understand. Concepts easy on the human mind like war. Enemy. Win. So I'm the goddess of war."
> Odysseus: "And wisdom. That's what I need right now."
> Athena: "I'm good at wisdom: might is right. Simple concise and irrefutable. And don't offend the gods: warning to the wise."[9]

In the course of the play, we realize that this goddess is more akin to Ares than the classical Athena, seeking and glorying in the destruction and chaos of war. We learn later of her reasons for hating Ajax: they are the same as reported by Calchas in Sophocles. But in a twist from Sophocles, Athena has sent not only madness which leads to Ajax confusing animals for humans, but also trauma of a different kind: "unexploded mines of terror…blood-soaked memories…Past horror crashed into the present neon flashes of mutilation and children, that always works, on, off, the same again and again, his own, a film, a story, who knows? As I said, scrambled."[10] This is a goddess who revels in sending battle trauma, not just madness, as punishment for *hubris*. The origin of both madness and trauma are external, even while the suffering is internal.

Athena's insistence on being *only* goddess of war echoes throughout the play, setting up an opposition that echoes the Aphrodite / Ares duality of love and war, rather than the polytheism of the ancient paradigm. This is most marked in relation to Tecmessa: this Athena is unable to get into Tecmessa's head because Tecmessa hears different voices. Indeed, this Athena disapproves of the presence of women in the army, the implication being they undermine the *ethos* of war promoted by Athena. Wertenbaker's Athena is, accordingly, a bitter enemy of Ajax, and seeks his death, hounding him with madness into suicide, and only at the end joins in directing that his corpse be buried. War is hell and the goddess who personifies it has no redeeming qualities.

[9] Ibid. 14.
[10] Ibid. 16.

Athena shares a special relationship with Odysseus: both as patron but also as teacher, with a particular line in mockery: she requires Odysseus to hide under a sheepskin to witness the proceedings.[11] In this and later scenes, Wertenbaker appears to vie with Sophocles by evoking Homeric echoes, but they are of the *Odyssey* book IX, not of the *Iliad*: Odysseus' donning of the sheep disguise on fleeing from Polyphemus the Cyclops. This injects humour but also prefigures Odysseus as the survivor, and Athena as his personal patroness and guiding intelligence.

The chorus then appears; it is composed of battle-hardened followers of Ajax who share their flashbacks of war, fear of grenades, bullets, dead friends, voices. This seems like a regular interrogation as the chorus leader, here the Company Sergeant Major or CSM questions them about their states of mind. All are aware of PTSD and its impact, and there are systems in place to assess soldiers for their susceptibility to trauma, setting up an expectation of aid and treatment. Rumours abound and the men are dismayed to hear of the possibility of Ajax being mentally unhinged: if the best of their commanding officers, the one who always looks after his men, always does the right thing, is affected, what does that augur for the rest of them? They are the ones who repeatedly say "our Ajax" and praise him as a leader of men. Odysseus envies this and we see another possible reference to the *Odyssey* and some of Odysseus' failures as a leader in that epic.

Tecmessa is introduced as a medic, and she comes on confessing her helplessness: she knows about injured bodies but not injured minds, and she appeals to the men to help Ajax: "Ajax's soul belongs to his men. Help him."[12] She describes the madness in the night, "the butchery of his rage".[13] He speaks "a new language of rage".[14] Wertenbaker weaves the killing of the animals cleverly and credibly into the plot, transforming the

[11] Ibid. 17.
[12] Ibid. 24.
[13] Ibid. 26.
[14] Ibid. 28.

slaughter into a crisis for the army: the killing of the explosives-detection dogs endangers the troops while the slaughter of the goats both affects the food supply and outrages the locals who demand the perpetrator be handed over to them for punishment.

The cries of Ajax are chilling and when he is revealed, both the internal and external audiences are transfixed: the blood-soaked walls and floor of the tent, and the grieving man in the centre. We hear that "red waves crashed around me in a perfect storm of murder"[15] echoing Sophocles. Tecmessa exhorts the men to talk to Ajax but they stand aghast, words failing them even as Ajax cries for help, begging them to end the mutilation of his mind by killing him. He keeps up the "look at me" theme and curses the fact that his enemies have eluded him, but expresses remorse at the animals slaughtered. Tormented by the imagined mockery of Odysseus and others, the solution is to kill them, then himself: "Ajax. K.I.A. The end."[16]

Unlike in Sophocles, Ajax has heard "a god's voice of war I heard it clearly: kill them! Kill them all! Guiding my steps in the dark I felt the god's love, the god's command" directed at snipers, children holding grenades.[17] Athena again, provoking to violence, and targeting everyone, combatants and non-combatants alike. In Sophoclean style Ajax resorts to apostrophe: addressing hell he says "Take me, take me now down far down – I'm not staying here: not with these eyes on me: the whole army watching – dig the dust with my own hands, hide underground, quick."[18] When a soldier touches him, Ajax rounds on him savagely, instincts at the ready, a fine acting-out of the raw, savage nature attributed to him, but also the twitchy reactions of the sufferer of PTSD, whose nerves are hyper sensitive and always primed for aggression.

[15] Ibid. 31.
[16] Ibid. 33.
[17] Ibid. 34.
[18] Ibid.

Ajax articulates the same motives for death: shame before his father, failure to match his father's exploits. Yet when he speaks of being passed over for promotion, the motive appears weak and slight when put beside the trauma of battle wounds. Wertenbaker summarizes Sophocles well enough when her protagonist speaks the words that sound the crisis of despair arising from being trapped and seeing no way out: "God hates me. The army despises me and this Asian desert finds me repellent. Now what?"[19] But do these words really fit the conception of a traumatized Ajax?

There is a sinewy strength to Wertenbaker's words, a pithy modern voice, but they somehow give the lie to the talk of gods and fate. The meanings are also undercut by the modern view of suicide and its crisis in terms of mental illness, rather than deliberate choice and glory. These differing interpretations sit uncomfortably together. Is this suicidal crisis the result of an episode that plunges the protagonist into a situation with no exit, as occurred to the Sophoclean Ajax, caused by his own acts, in reaction to an unbearable insult? Or is it the result of a long period of trauma, inflicted by the protagonist's experiences and the nature of war, culminating in self-destruction? Agency and responsibility become crucial here, as discussed in the previous chapter. By casting Athena as the personification of war, Wertenbaker appears to suggest that war itself is to blame, and the individual soldier is broken by prolonged exposure to war.

When Tecmessa intervenes, her pleas are along the lines of those in Sophocles, but with a different back story: this Tecmessa is a foreigner, a refugee from an earlier theatre of war, who freely chose her new motherland and the brawny and brave Ajax. Tecmessa is sympathetic and movingly portrayed by Frances Ashman, her willing love and free choice show us in turn a sympathetic Ajax and the interaction between the characters at this point is affectionate and moving. Tecmessa is impervious to Athena; she seems to hear the goddess of love, not war, though the name of Aphrodite is never

[19] Ibid. 36.

spoken. For all Tecmessa's tenderness, Ajax responds with a specific memory of their first meeting, but ends with an exhortation to her not to flinch at death. Tecmessa speaks movingly of their love, "the joyful peace in our war, the enemy's loving hand",[20] but fails to reach Ajax.

Ajax demands his son and the farewell he makes also follows Sophocles. But Wertenbaker changes the emphasis in two ways. First, where Sophocles' Ajax is ironic when he says that killing his son would have crowned his misfortune, this Ajax is conflicted and tentative: "Ajax never harmed a child – did he?" Next, when his son enters Ajax freezes, apparently seeing, not his son, but the image of a child cowering in a corner. This image is worked into the trauma that afflicts Ajax.

At the climax of this scene, when Ajax denies all pleas and leaves, Wertenbaker's encapsulation is once again neat and pithy in dramatizing Ajax's estrangement from the gods and isolation from those around him: "For god's sake, don't betray us." "I owe nothing to any god." "Ajax, please listen to your men." "My men listen to me." "Then listen to me." "No one's going to change me now."[21]

The chorus members next speak of their longing for home and the fall of Ajax, sympathizing with his desire for death: "Ajax knows: better to be dead than sick like this, crazy."[22] They recognize that he is different: "He was the best of the lot. Now he's not what he was he's wandering beside himself. We can't find him in that empty look: pulled back."[23] They think of the family and hope Tecmessa can give him an infusion of hope. And, contrary to Sophocles, they leave to seek Teucer.

At this point, in another departure from Sophocles, Wertenbaker reintroduces Odysseus and Athena, a scene that appears central to her vision of the play, and Athena's

[20] Ibid. 40.
[21] Ibid. 43-4.
[22] Ibid. 45-6.
[23] Ibid. 46.

role in it as personification of war. These allies have been silent witnesses of the scenes so far. Odysseus interrogates the meaning of the action and its implications for the army and its situation, especially the trauma of war. What will Ajax do? Suicide makes sense to the kind of man Ajax is: wanting and needing control, he cannot accept the disintegration of his mind. This assumes a continuing PTSD induced trauma, rather than a past episode of madness the consequences of which traps Sophocles' Ajax in such a manner that suicide is seen as the only way out.

The implications for a continuing trauma are grave: Odysseus wants to prevent Ajax's death, for it could contaminate other soldiers, a syndrome often called the effect of "contagion" in suicide. Worse, death by suicide of the best soldier destroys the illusion of heroic glory in battle, which is often the illusion that most attracts young men into the army. Odysseus first asks Athena to stop Ajax's self-destruction but she says: "He doesn't hear me anymore and anyway pity is a human trait."[24]

Next, Odysseus considers talking Ajax out of it, persuasion being his strong suit. But he desists when Athena suggests that he could be courting his own death, and hints that he would be better off without the example of the bravest soldier showing up his deficiencies. Odysseus confesses to fellow feeling but also to intense competitiveness. Analysing the problem, as earlier commanded by Athena, a lesson well learned ("This is an intelligence test military Facts. Deduction. Strategy"[25]), Odysseus cogently sets out the consequences of Ajax continuing to be traumatized: soldiers could successfully claim war trauma to avoid battle and not be branded cowards, with the consequence that war itself would be called into question. That would not do: a totally unacceptable outcome to both him, and his patron goddess. For war to continue, Odysseus believes he has to stop Ajax, keep him alive; the question is how. In this scene, the issue of madness

[24] Ibid. 47.
[25] Ibid. 13.

prompted by denial of promotion has morphed into one that interrogates trauma; this assumes that the denial of promotion would not have prompted a possible suicidal crisis in the absence of a pre-existing trauma.

While Odysseus is looking for ways to keep Ajax from self-destructing, the goddess of war pushes for a different solution to the problem: think "laterally" she urges Odysseus. It takes only seconds for Odysseus to conclude: an Ajax dead, dead by his own hand, with the aftermath controlled by the survivors, is the preferred outcome.[26] Wertenbaker's Athena is actively hostile to Ajax and seeks the continuation of war. Later she explains her motives by reference to Ajax's rejection of her aid and his self-sufficiency in battle, behaviour that renders her unnecessary and otiose. Her motive of self-perpetuation through the perpetuation of war is thereby laid bare: in this she and Odysseus are alike. This is not Sophocles' Athena who counsels keeping Ajax safe indoors for a day after which her enmity would end. Sophocles implies God's enmity can end. But not this goddess whose enmity is implacable and whose purposes are purely martial.

The arrival of Menelaos suits the plot line here: the villagers are demanding compensation and threatening violent retaliation. Menelaos does not know the identity of the perpetrator but is cynically prepared to hand him over to the locals to deal with. We see Odysseus making up to Menelaos, and the whole question of the former's promotion through friendly influence becomes plausible. Yet we are reminded that this ally is responsible for "the friendly fire" and so turned into "the deadly one".[27]

Next, Ajax appears and speaks the deception speech. This is spoken in prose yet the core of the poetry remains. especially the reference to time bringing forth all things into the light (*Aj.* 646-7). Can this be congruent with PTSD? Post-traumatic stress can

[26] Ibid. 50.
[27] Ibid.

feel and manifest differently from the suicide crisis. Where the suicidal crisis often fades with the ending of the immediate crisis or existential dilemma, PTSD can persist for years, even decades, and its chronic nature may wear the sufferer down until suicide is seen as the only way out. The implication is that we are to assume that Ajax has been suffering PTSD for a long time, and the denial of promotion is merely the final trigger. But when Ajax speaks Sophocles' lines, "And then I'll know how to yield to any god and to the higher authority of the Generals" (*Aj*. 666-7), this may represent a submission to the situation, an acceptance of his demotion, but is no solution to the war trauma and contains no expression of seeking out medical and psychological help, as would be expected in the contemporary context, and explicitly set out in the discussion between the chorus members earlier in the play.[28] The closest to this are Ajax's final words to Tecmessa and the chorus: "I'm going where I need to go. I may be in pain now but I'll find a way to save myself and my honour."[29]

In an interview of the director David Mercatali by Chrissy Combes,[30] he says this of the deception speech: "I don't think Ajax knew what he was going to do at that point…We almost took aside anything we knew about the original…and it just became what Joe [Dixon] did in the moment. For me it wasn't deception." This was Ajax wanting more time to think through his options even while he thought of suicide: ambivalence in other words. The desire to live is conveyed in the loving words exchanged with Tecmessa and the personal farewells and words to his men.[31] "All in all, this was a very challenging speech and I know it is a controversial and ambiguous one. But Joe and I felt that the whole speech was not about manipulation or deception, nothing so complicated. For us, certainly based on Timberlake's text, the situation is that from moment to moment, Ajax's

[28] Ibid. 19-20.
[29] Ibid. 55.
[30] Combes 2013.
[31] Wertenbaker 2013: 52-5.

desires and intentions change."[32] According to Mercatali, research into suicide informed this approach, and we have seen in the previous chapter that some veterans at staged readings of the *Ajax* shared this interpretation.

Tecmessa tries to prevent Ajax from leaving alone; she pleads to accompany him or for him to allow one of the soldiers to do so. This highlights the real dangers outside the compound, which will be a factor later, as well as Ajax's motive to be alone in order to kill himself. There is a hint that he has not changed when he says: "No ambush waits for the solitary man but himself."[33]

The chorus rejoices and calls on Pan and Apollo while jiving to modern music; they celebrate Ajax forgetting his "great quarrel", how "time blows up everything even the anger of an Ajax".[34] Reference to the Greek gods strikes an odd note here, though mostly the words are lost in the music.

The play's modernity is emphasized by the messenger communicating by text message. There is mystery here as the "messenger" sending the texts takes different identities, including that of the Padre or Christian minister; at the very least, Wertenbaker is suggesting forces taking Ajax's side now that her Athena is the moving force pushing him to destruction. But these forces are not identified. The key text is straight from Sophocles: "Bodies that are great but without thought fall brutally at the hands of God when a man born with the limitations of human nature refuses to accept those limitations with his human mind." (*Aj*. 757-61) In a metatheatrical moment, Athena translates this to both the chorus and the audience: Ajax has forgotten "the limits of being human", "he went over. Crack on is good, go too far and I'll crack you."[35]. Read with the earlier scene,

[32] Combes 2013.
[33] Ibid. 53-4.
[34] Ibid. 56.
[35] Ibid. 58-9.

we sense a neat inversion: Ajax's failure was not that he claimed a god's stature but his success appears to deny any glory to the goddess.

Athena continues: "Now maybe you're thinking how real are you? Let's say: as long as I have power over you, I'm real – I hold in my wide arms all that you can't contain in yourselves".[36] Belief, and participation in theatrical illusion, are the sources of her power. But more than that, Wertenbaker appears to me to be inviting spectators to ask themselves if their (implicit, unexamined) belief in the power of the goddess of war, war regarded as archetypal or universal, is responsible for the perpetuation of war. Yet this particular dramatization of war as an inexorable and unavoidable force, and a highly unattractive force, is not matched by the opposing and necessary characterization, such as is contained in the ancient personification of Athena. She was a war goddess but also a shining, desirable, seductive goddess who promises glory to her devotees—glory characterized by an "arms of Achilles" or its modern equivalent, which would be promotion and prestige, bits of ribbon and their power. This may have been intended to be conveyed by the actor playing Athena as a slinky, silver gowned seductress. But the characterization failed in that regard, perhaps owing to the relative youth of Gemma Chan in the role of Athena.

In contrast to Ajax who forgot human limits, Odysseus is a willing compliant partner to Athena: "Now look at Odysseus: he always has my voice in his head See what I mean? He's coming. Heard me on the divine walkie-talkie."[37]

The next exchanges are again new: Odysseus interrogates the men on the whereabouts of Ajax and, hearing that he has gone out, says that he fears "a madman wandering around on his own." Then comes a strange line: "And a whole fucking pack of scribes has just arrived, looking for some story, one of their tragic myths, makes them

[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid. 59.

feel they've tasted combat but pity is exactly what we don't want here anywhere or ever."[38] Ajax and his actions are about to become myth; pity and empathy inform the creative act, and pity and empathy are dangerous. This Odysseus echoes Athena's earlier contempt for pity. And then we have Athena: "I like a good tragedy myself."[39] Tragedy *is* about pity after all, and the audience is reminded that the destruction of Ajax is a piteous spectacle, notwithstanding the indifference of Athena and Odysseus. At Athena's instigation, Odysseus leaves to warn the generals.

Tecmessa reads the final message now coming from one who calls himself "the messenger": "The next hours will decide between life and death".[40] Recognizing this as the "golden hour when you can save someone"[41], she begins the search for Ajax.

Ajax, in his death speech, reveals an ambivalence that Sophocles' hero does not display at that point but which Wertenbaker's vision requires. This Ajax re-lives battle decisions through flashbacks, the recurring nightmares of being forced to take split second decisions involving choices: whose lives do you put first, civilians' or soldiers'? However you act, the results are horrific and stay with you: dead comrades or dead children. And to what end? How complicit are the civilians? What consequences are triggered except revenge and more violence? Worse, Ajax is unsure which version of events is true, because his mind plays two parallel versions.

The further truth is that the war is not about the enemy but about the military code: respect, honour, a job well done,[42] "and never be ashamed laughed at or pitied."[43] But it returns to "But where's the nobility in the eyes of the child who asks, what is all this all for?"[44]

[38] Ibid. 60.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid. 61
[41] Ibid.
[42] A philosophy at odds with the pragmatism displayed by Athena.
[43] Wertenbaker 2013: 63.
[44] Ibid.

Ajax returns to his personal dishonor and "calls on the spirits of revenge to visit the same destruction" on the Generals and for his men to go home. His desire is for his body to be found before it is mutilated by the enemy, a real possibility in this war, and for it to be "brought home with honour." He ends: "It's all about honour isn't it?"[45]

Sophocles' Ajax would never have ended his death speech with an interrogative: his Ajax knew no tentativeness, no uncertainty about the meaning of life and honour. This line exemplifies the fact that there are two different Ajaxes is this play: the intransigent Sophoclean Ajax, refusing to submit to the generals, intermittently referred to as when the CSM later says: "He was never going to bend. Not Ajax. Should've known. Invincible Ajax."[46] And there is the traumatized Ajax whose death is an end to torment, and who dies with a question on his lips, unsure of the reason for it all but pushed nevertheless to end his life. We are often not sure which version of Ajax is speaking or being referred to.

The same uncertainty informs the responses of the survivors. Tecmessa grieves but concedes that death "was sweet to Ajax too, what he wanted, longed for. No one will laugh at him now. Whatever he saw, he saw it clearly and did what he had to."[47] The CSM says: "When did Ajax ever hesitate?"[48] This vision, their visions of Ajax, appear constructed by their own understandings and expectations and reflect neither the deception speech nor the death speech as re-visioned by Wertenbaker.

The play's second half largely follows Sophocles. William Postlethwaite is a youthful and sympathetic Teucer while the chorus condemn warfare, recalling Helmand, Troy, Basra, Aden, Bosnia, Malaya, Vietnam, and longing for home. Teucer and Menelaos quarrel on the same lines as Sophocles, except that at two points, Menelaos mocks Ajax's heroism, calling him a suicide and a coward, in keeping with Christian

[45] Ibid. 65.
[46] Ibid. 68.
[47] Ibid. 68.
[48] Ibid. 69.

ideas and contemporary notions of suicide. Teucer in his defence of Ajax against Menelaos, addresses this by recounting Ajax's courage, but also countering Menelaos' accusation: "He dishonoured himself: suicide is the act of a coward" with "Then perhaps you should not send us on so many suicide missions"[49] pertinently pointing out that every time a soldier set foot outside the camp he courted death. This of course is another paradox: the courage of soldiers in battle is praised, yet every entry into battle is a courting of death. Court death too avidly or not at all and you are dishonoured either way. The Spartans held a similar view: Herodotus relates how in the aftermath of Thermopylae the Spartan Amompharetus who fought ferociously at Plataea was denied honours for having deliberately sought death (9.56-7). As Ephraim David in a study of suicide in Sparta put it: "The Spartan was expected to be ready to die for his country if necessary, not to court death."[50]

Teucer reminds us of Ajax, the man, not just the suicide. But some of the conflict is also shaped to the politics of the coalition in Afghanistan and plays to a British audience tired of the war there and the subordination of the coalition to US leadership. Menelaos makes a crass and boorish American commander, with particularly repellent values. This politics of coalition admirably reflects the tribal politics of the Trojan War, and the status of Ajax vis-à-vis the Greek commanders, and is one of the ways in which Wertenbaker's relocation of the play to Afghanistan resonates with its ancient context.

Odysseus ends the play as the wily politician currying favour with the Americans. It appears that he has abandoned some of Athena's teaching, for he invokes pity and pushes for a humane response in the burial of the body. Odysseus is at his persuasive best here; however in the context of this play, he is but speaking up for and supporting

[49] Ibid. 74.
[50] David 2004: 36.

his own side, and not speaking as the leader of a separate faction as in Sophocles, where his support carries more weight.

This exchange also allows for what appears at first hearing to be sympathetic words from Athena, who tells Menelaos to bury Ajax. Menelaos, who cannot see Athena, exclaims: "I'm hearing voices."[51] But is Athena now choosing Menelaos as a suitable partner in place of Odysseus since the latter is exhibiting pity, that is, a humanity at odds with the values of his patroness? Or are we to genuinely believe in an Athena who, her enemy now dead, supports his decent burial?

The final tableau is moving: the body is draped with the Union Jack, wife and son kneel and touch the body, the men stand at attention. The final sentiments reflect Sophocles' final lines but restricted to soldiers and not men in general: "Soldiers experience and understand many things but we can never guess in advance how we'll act."[52] This reference to soldiers certainly fits the context of war trauma.

7.3 Critical Reception

In general, the reviews of the production praised the PTSD elements. Michael Billington in *The Guardian* called it "a compelling picture of the damage war inflicts on the individual psyche, and of the insane demands it places on the leaders as well as the led…This play enlarges our understanding of the way war drives so many to suicide or mental breakdown."[53] Honour Bayes in *The Stage* commented that Wertenbaker "brings old and new together to interrogate the psychological cost of modern warfare…[with] touching insights into the conflicted minds of our soldiers on the ground."[54] Sarah Hemming in the *Financial Times* called it "a painful reminder that the price of war can

[51] During a post-show Q&A session, Wertenbaker referred to the religious beliefs of George W. Bush and Tony Blair in their prosecution of the Iraq war, and how this suggested a parallel belief in voices.
[52] Wertenbaker 2013: 81.
[53] Billington 2013.
[54] Bayes 2013.

be catastrophic damage to minds as well as bodies…It is a frank and compassionate study of psychological and emotional extremis."[55]

However, the classical anachronisms were found to be unhelpful and distracting. The role of Athena, while generally regarded as well acted by Gemma Chan, was seen as out of place. Michael Billington in the *Guardian* was typical when he said: "a goddess of war seems an odd presence in today's world".[56] Sarah Hemming in the *Financial Times* goes further to say that "the presence of Athena doesn't really work and her scenes with Odysseus jolt you away from the human drama and slow the pace."[57] War as a universal, archetypal force perhaps fails to persuade a modern audience or else the personification itself as written and acted was too one-sided to carry conviction, as suggested by the above reviews.

For some reviewers the anachronisms were merely unsettling: "anachronistic oddities" according to Billington[58], making for "awkwardness" according to Sarah Hemming[59]. For Honour Bayes: "Wertenbaker doesn't completely marry her and Sophocles' voices together and this contemporary classic sometimes feels stilted."[60] Others went further and wished Wertenbaker had omitted the Sophoclean elements and written a straight-out anti-war play. For Stephen Bates in *thereviewshub*, retaining Athena and the Greek names "are diversions that serve only to stall the drama…This play and the anti-war messages contained in it could have been much more potent if [Wertenbaker] had simply taken and updated just the core story and severed all other links to Sophocles' original play."[61]

[55] Hemming 2013.
[56] Billington 2013.
[57] Hemming 2013.
[58] Billington 2013.
[59] Hemming 2013.
[60] Bayes 2013.
[61] Bates 2013.

David Ralf in *Exeunt Magazine* found the voices of the ordinary soldiers in the chorus compelling, voices he assumes were based on Wertenbaker's interviews with soldiers and veterans: "They are a hint to a different kind of play, about divided loyalties, about the kinds of people who thrive in combat and those who are scarred in more ways than one. But *Our Ajax* doesn't allow enough room for their experiences to carry emotional weight."[62] Instead "The plot implausibly runs its course to the Sophoclean letter, and the production never succeeds in coalescing the text's dual loyalties…Every decision which stays true to the Greek text feels like it holds back a play that is really needed, which argues with nuance and polemic about modern warfare and its effect on the people who choose and are chosen to fight it."[63]

Sam Marlowe in the *Metro* made a similar observation in a review entitled "Competent and relevant – but lacking in originality", commenting in particular on the clash of poetry and prose styles: "The collision of poetry with workmanlike, clipped dialogue gives the writing a strikingly abrasive texture…This is a play of undeniable relevance but it achieves little beyond the reiteration of well-worn truths."[64]

Sarah Hemming found that "The antiquity of the source play and its formality of style intensify the sense of conflict as a continuing human sore."[65] But precisely this use of the source play was found distracting and unpalatable to Eleanor Turney writing in *ayoungertheatre.com* that "in striving for universality" the play "undermines the specificity of the horrors of waterboarding and so-called collateral damage. It allows the audience to distance itself – to place this play firmly in a mythological setting where honour is everything and therefore not to examine the traumas and tortures of modern warfare…The Sophoclean hangover is distracting."[66] These reviewers find limited

[62] Ralf 2013.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Marlowe 2013.
[65] Hemming 2013.
[66] Turner 2013.

parallels between ancient and modern warfare, and would have preferred one that focused on the contemporary challenges and perhaps a more polemical tone.

But polemic was precisely what Wertenbaker wished to avoid. Though anti-war by personal conviction, that apparently makes no difference to her writing, as told to M.F. Jones in the *Exeunt* interview: "When I was researching this play, there was absolutely no judgment… Soldiers don't make the wars – it's the politicians. Yes, you can choose to be a soldier, or you can reject it, but the appeal is fascinating. I wanted to understand that. Some like violence; most want to test themselves."[67] When questioned about taking positions, Wertenbaker responded: "Nobody thinks war is a good thing, especially for the people who have to wage it. A writer has to really withhold moral judgment. If I want people to do something, I'll march or sign a petition."[68] Her purpose in the play was to "help people understand."[69] Part of that understanding she intends to convey is indeed to use Sophocles to demonstrate the antiquity of war, and the traditions it fosters, traditions that carry antique ideals of honour and glory, service and duty.

Events of the week of the play's premiere had some resonance with the play as mentioned by a number of reviewers. As Philip Fisher in the *British Theatre Guide* put it: "The political dimension is highly effective, especially in the week when a British soldier has been convicted of murder in a scene that could easily have been borrowed from Greek tragedy (or our American cousins)."[70] On 8th November 2013, Sgt Alexander Blackman was convicted by a military court of the murder of an Afghan insurgent (deliberately shooting dead an unarmed and injured enemy combatant who had surrendered) in 2011; on 6th December 2013 (after *Our Ajax* had ended its run) he was sentenced to life and ordered to serve at least ten years in prison before being eligible for

[67] Jones 2013.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Fisher 2013.

parole. Prior to the sentence, there were calls for both severity and leniency in sentence, from different sectors of the military. During sentencing, the judge advocate general Jeff Blackett found that though Sgt Blackman had likely been suffering from combat stress after three tours of Iraq and two of Afghanistan, a strong deterrent sentence was needed to demonstrate to the international community that UK battlefield troops would be subject to the highest standards and war crimes would not go unpunished.

As reported by Morris and Norton-Taylor in *The Guardian*: "Privately in military circles there is unease and frustration that Blackman was given what many will consider a harsh sentence, and have huge sympathy for him and his family. Blackman's commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Simon Chapman, said he would continue to support the marine. He said: 'Fundamentally he is not a bad man. In fact, in almost every respect, he is a normal citizen tainted only by the impact of war.'"[71] However, on appeal, the murder verdict was set aside in 2017 and substituted by a conviction of manslaughter on the basis of diminished responsibility from "adjustment disorder" that affected his rational judgment, sentenced to a prison term of seven years and released after serving three-and-a-half years.[72] I speculate that if the My Lai massacres were adjudicated today, diminished responsibility or its equivalent in the U.S justice system would likely apply to exonerate or lessen the sentence of any accused in that war crime, given the widespread acceptance of PTSD amid the current resurgence of nationalistic and patriotic sentiments.

For some in the military, then, trauma may excuse the soldier who kills an enemy combatant, but ambivalence surrounds the soldier who kills himself. There is currently greater awareness about PTSD and suicide among the armed forces, as statistics and studies of trauma and suicide in the forces fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq (American, British, Canadian) have revealed. The statistics for veteran suicide in the U.S. were

[71] Morris and Norton-Taylor 2013.
[72] Morris 2017.

approximately twenty-two per day in 2010 as quoted in the previous chapter. A BBC Panorama programme entitled 'Broken by Battle' broadcast on 15 July 2013 revealed that in 2012 more British soldiers (21 serving soldiers and 29 veterans) of the Afghan war had killed themselves than had died on the field (44) in Afghanistan that year.[73] There is recognition that more resources need to be allocated for assessment, treatment and support and Wertenbaker evidently felt there was a need to address this issue. PTSD and trauma were her way into understanding, and updating, the ancient play.

7.4.1 The Body on Stage: Physicality, Embodiment, Immediacy, Emotion

Notwithstanding the hesitations and qualifications of the reviewers, in the main *Our Ajax* was regarded as a successful performance carried, primarily, by the force of Joe Dixon's performance. "A towering performance."[74] "But it is Joe Dixon who steals the honours here. He is hypnotic as the mentally shattered Ajax in what is a tour de force performance."[75] "Joe Dixon's riveting, volatile and unsettling performance."[76] "Joe Dixon is superb and surprisingly sympathetic Ajax."[77] "As Ajax, Joe Dixon is utterly believable…He's the main reason why the show works."[78] "Joe Dixon gives a bravura performance in the title role."[79]

Indeed the play was often propelled by the passion and energy of Joe Dixon's performance, even while supported by a fine ensemble. This was owing to several factors. The first is simply physicality: a very large tall man, Dixon dominated with his sheer bulk. Next, classically trained, he conveyed many shades of feeling through body, gesture and voice. In the opening, the sheer violence of his actions, the verbal vindictiveness and

[73] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-23259865
[74] Billington 2013.
[75] Bayes 2013.
[76] Hemming 2013.
[77] Turney 2013.
[78] Bowie-Sell 2013 in *TimeOut*.
[79] Fisher 2013.

curses show up the madness and horror of his condition. His subsequent wails and groans as he regains his sanity, are spine-chilling: this man has lost control and resembles a wreck among wrecks. The heightened language contrasts with those interludes where he becomes silent or says little: the silence conveys both anguish and menace, suggesting that more is going on below the surface than we are allowed to see but, like the chorus and Tecmessa, we dread the heavy silences.

Touches of tenderness and affection are conveyed through behaviour that is not clear from the text: Ajax's tenderness with Tecmessa, his son and his men, reveal a man deserving of praise and respect. We see and hear a man in agony, in torment, driven to the furthest straits and forced to confront bitter truths. But he remains forceful, commanding, authoritative, inspirational even, and thus makes credible the belief and respect of his men even when he appears a menacing and terrifying madman. Through both speech and act, speech that is often almost all Sophocles, he displays those traits that others praise him for, including Athena. His fall is therefore the subject of fitting lament and grief. The production therefore largely worked as theatre, with the audience carried on a journey with the actors. The immediacy of the involvement covered over the fault lines in the text.

The language of lament was less well received, at least in the later half. Teucer's grieving was commented upon as self-serving and out of place; modern audiences appear less comfortable with male lament compared to the emotionalism of Greek tragedy that was very much part of the appeal for ancient audiences.

7.4.2 Voice: the Contrasting Language of Prose and Poetry

Wertenbaker's retention of Sophocles' major speeches (the tortured discussion of reasons for death, the deception speech, the farewell and even the one-liners and *stichomythia*), when juxtaposed with her more prosaic language in the new lines she introduces, makes

for incongruities. It is one of the fault lines that divide the two plays, her own and Sophocles'. Even converted into prose, Sophocles' incandescent language combines with the drama of the onstage suicide to work its effect powerfully: the despair of the dishonoured blood-soaked hero, the hopelessness of his embattled situation, the poetic ambivalence of the deception speech, the poignant farewells and ringing curses of the suicide speech. Yet this sits oddly with the contemporary prose passages, which speak in a different key: recognizably modern, suitably downbeat.

7.4.3 Efficacy of Wertenbaker's vision

Has Wertenbaker released the power of the ancient play? *Our Ajax* introduced Sophocles' *Ajax* to a new audience while making skilful use of elements within the play that work well with a setting in Afghanistan and contemporary coalition politics. But does the syndrome of PTSD work convincingly within the ancient context of the play transposed to the modern setting? Part of the problem is in decoding to what extent war trauma and PTSD would have afflicted the ancients, because a dramatization of PTSD *can* carry conviction if it is regarded as a trans-historical phenomenon. This is especially necessary where, as here, the syndrome of PTSD is directly grafted onto the ancient play.

In my view, Sophocles' Ajax did not suffer from PTSD: he never challenges the morality of the Trojan War except in so far as the epic code has broken down. His is a crisis of thwarted desires and diverted revenge, leaving him utterly isolated, with death as the only way out. But it is certainly a crisis of mental anguish, if not entirely correlating to the constellation of symptoms that make up PTSD. There are also different cultural meanings attached to suicide: PTSD evokes feelings of pity and sympathy, and even a judgment of weakness and of having reached the end of endurance, very different from the whitehot rage and fury of a thwarted hero whose self-inflicted death becomes a potent form of revenge. The *emotional registers* appear different, giving rise to incongruity. One

could almost use musical language to express this: Ajax's actions culminate in suicide as a rising crescendo in Sophocles, with its tightly constructed, time-bound action, and its passionate defiance of the gods and the generals. In contrast, PTSD, with its long term chronic symptoms, produces a gradual attrition similar to a diminuendo in musical terms.

Is PTSD latent within Sophocles? Or is it at odds with the ancient concept of the Homeric warrior and therefore an inadequate substitute for the overwhelming psychological crisis that afflicts Ajax in the original play? Sophocles was himself incorporating anachronism by contrasting the Homeric warrior ideal against the Athenian hoplite reality. The difference is that Sophocles uses two voices to articulate the different ideals: Ajax is pure epic hero, and Menelaus speaks of the obedience and collective effort that the hoplite line requires. The play continually interrogates both ideal and reality. In contrast, Wertenbaker's Ajax is suffering from two different syndromes, speaking in two different voices and registers simultaneously.

7.4.4 Athena and War

Wertenbaker may be regarded as playing with Sophocles' text and exploiting "fully its potential for generating associations".[80] We see from the reviews that the particular association with PTSD was well received, yet the classical references were regarded as anachronistic, in particular the presence and actions of an Athena. Yet that presence seems crucial for Wertenbaker's vision; that is, she interrogates war through Athena's personification of war. It is war that drives men mad even where it pushes them to seek glory, war that brings trauma and pain. Worse, war becomes its own purpose, to be pursued for its own ends, like a self-perpetuating goddess.

The *politics* of war does not come across as particularly significant in this production. Certainly, the generals are criticized, and the long-drawn-out conflict is seen

[80] Fischer-Lichte 2010: 35.

as hugely detrimental to the health of the participants. However, there is no sense that any particular *political* outcome will result in an end to the war. Instead if war is a universal force, one that attracts men and women to join the forces for reasons, good and ill, then Wertenbaker's vision of a personified goddess of war in Athena and her seductive power for combatants and non-combatants alike, as the metatheatrics of the play suggest, is meant to interrogate that power by showing audience and participants the cost of war, and the price it exacts in bodies and blood. No solutions are presented to this within the play's parameters.

We begin the play with Athena as a voice in the mind of Ajax, a voice pushing him into violence. A number of reviewers have suggested that she ought to have remained a voice only, an inner demon, or fantasy figure, which sits comfortably within current theories of psychosis. Externalizing Athena, in the manner of the Greeks, creates a form so anachronistic as to be unconvincing to a modern audience. However, inner voices are specific to the sufferer, no two voices can be the same, without taking on an external identity. Personified, Athena acquires that archetypal force required for Wertenbaker's vision of the play.

7.5 Conclusion

Throughout *Our Ajax* there occurs the metaphor of muddling, scrambling, losing the chronology. This is deliberate and often appropriate: war is chaotic muddling through, scrambling about in the desert sand, unsure of who is the enemy, confusing motive and outcome. States of mind are also muddled, uncertain, especially the ambivalence of the suicide crisis. But muddling and scrambling also become metaphors for the play itself, as it scrambles together themes that do not work well together, that is, the traumas of war and the particular crisis that drives the Sophoclean Ajax. As discussed in the previous chapter, moral issues of choice and agency have bedevilled PTSD from the beginning,

with the result that the syndrome sits awkwardly on the epic and Sophoclean Ajax. To reiterate this within my research question: while the suicidal crisis within PTSD is skilfully handled and articulated in the play, it does not map entirely onto the wider crisis experienced in the Sophoclean play which still articulates the suicide crisis in the broadest of senses, and is not limited to PTSD where the chronic nature of the syndrome plays out in different ways. This comparative failure of Wertenbaker's traumatised Ajax reinforces my argument that the interpretation of PTSD through which the staged readings of the *Ajax* occur as discussed in the previous chapter, fails to address the complexity of the Sophoclean play in its entirety.

In addition, modernizing Sophocles' *Ajax* to an entirely contemporary and "real-life" theatre of war also domesticated it to the point where all the strangeness of the historical artefact was lost, and those portions retained were not able to bear the weight of their historical significance within the modern context. In this regard, comparing Wertenbaker's *Our Ajax* with Sellars' *Ajax* is instructive: the latter suggested an ancient play's potency through modern *theatrical* equivalences, and unsettled through its multiple qualities of staging and acting, keeping that power to shock that Sophocles so often exemplifies. Perhaps *Our Ajax* fails Sophocles because it is so insistently contemporary, and strives for contemporary naturalism in theatre, leaving it unable to convey the strangeness of the ancient artefact at its source. In this regard, PTSD may have made an effective play, given Wertenbaker's skills, on its own and with a new plot and characters, without needing Sophocles' *Ajax*.

What potency there is in *Our Ajax* is brought out by *performance*, a power that resides in the crisis of the hero as well as in the poetry and the language. While the production often struggled to make the metaphysics and concepts and language of the play cohere convincingly, especially in the role of Athena, the acting redeemed it, in that

Ajax is given a fully central tragic protagonist's role carried by the actor, who impressively conveyed the emotional power of this iconic figure.

Chapter Eight

Other Adaptations of the *Ajax* and Conclusion

In this concluding chapter, I begin (8.1) by studying a number of other productions that adapt the *Ajax*, that is, Colin Teevan's *The One Within* performed in 2005-6, *Sophocles: Seven Sicknesses* adapted and directed by Sean Graney performed in the U.S. in 2011 together with Theodoros Terzopoulos' 2013 *Ajax the Madness*, and lastly *Ajax in Iraq* written and adapted by Ellen McLaughlin in 2011. I then (8.2) summarize the argument of the preceding chapters and conclude (8.3) by proposing a reading of the *Ajax* together with Euripides' *Heracles* for a comprehensive view of the suicide crisis and a possible positive outcome.

8.1.1 *Ajax* in Ireland: Colin Teevan's *The One Within*

Colin Teevan's *Missing Persons: Four Tragedies and Roy Keane* comprises four monologues of meditations on modern masculinity, and a comic take on the footballer Roy Keane. It was published in 2005 and the monologues first performed on 5 August 2005 with Greg Hicks in the main role; it transferred to London in January 2006. The performance of the monologues, adaptations of the ancient myths of Ouranos, Ajax, Medea and Ariadne, was well received, especially Hicks' realisation of the roles, with one reviewer saying "Hicks's physical and vocal command of a space is masterly."[1]

The second monologue, *The One Within*, an adaptation of the *Ajax*, is the longest of the four, and unlike the others, is in two voices, those of Odysseus and Ajax. The place is Northern Ireland and the action is set in an abandoned abattoir and by the shore. Odysseus has come to take his former IRA colleague and brother-in-arms into custody to

[1] Marlowe 2006.

attend a hearing before the army tribunal for murder of an aide to the new president. In the context of the decommissioning of weapons following the Good Friday Agreement, Ajax has been ordered to lay down his gun, the gun which confers authority on the court, "this gun, more than any politician's statement, dignifies us and our struggles"[2], and he is unable to do so. Through the windows of the abattoir, Odysseus watches the drunken, delusional Ajax try, sentence, shoot, and decapitate two horses mistaking them for the president and his minister, whom he accuses of betrayal. Odysseus sends away his driver and waits for morning: he has a plan. On awakening, Ajax believes he is now the sole leader of the IRA. Through a series of questions Odysseus brings Ajax to identify himself, and his night-time slaughter. Expressing contrition for slaying the horses, Ajax's humanity, previously repressed by political necessity, comes flooding back, a metaphor that continues with echoes of Sophocles' circus of blood: "a storm has raged around my head! My thoughts are thrown from side to side, Washed in a tide of blood…No the seas subside, I see who you really are."[3]

Requested by Odysseus to accept the new reality by surrendering his arms, Ajax says he has been too long at war and this was not the peace he fought for. His injury stems from being manipulated by the political leadership to bring the militant forces, which Ajax leads, into the political compromise, before being betrayed: to him, the peace was meant to be simply another phase of the war. He does not have the "elasticity of motive"[4] to live within the compromise of the politicians; surrendering his weapon would be a betrayal of principle. But this attachment to the weapon suggests an inability to forgo war: Teevan was concerned about whether and how soldiers adapt to peace: "The question I wanted to ask was: 'What do you do with the man of war when the fighting's over?'"[5]

[2] Teevan 2005: 23.
[3] Ibid. 31.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Lynch 2005.

"Ancient myths can provide a key to understanding our society… Reclaiming these mythic tales, and making them relevant for our present time, can enable us to make sense of a sometimes senseless present."[6]

Odysseus is the consummate politician, speaking in forked tongues: first promising that the delusional slaughter of the horses will not be used against him, later backtracking, saying Ajax's voiced opposition to the leaders as proved by the dead horses cannot be allowed to pass since the murder of the aide has jeopardized the process of peace, and led to demands for justice. Ajax denies that murder, and we are left uncertain of the truth of that accusation, rather like the uncertainty of the tainted votes in *Ajax*, and partly mediated by the slipperiness of Odysseus, echoing his duplicitous persona in antiquity. In a scene reflective of the ambiguities of the "deception scene", Ajax agrees to comply: he will return and stand beside the politicians in solidarity. Odysseus however insists that public anger is crying out for him to be brought to justice, a parallel to the punishment of stoning threatened by the Greek army in Sophocles. Again, Ajax agrees to return, but before they leave he wants to wash away the blood in the sea and hurl the gun out as well, as a sign of his "new found obedience".[7] At first Odysseus wants the gun, then seeming to read, and encourage, the veiled suicidal intent, he acquiesces. In the confrontation by the shore, Ajax requests Odysseus to kill him. But Odysseus says he has been tasked to bring Ajax to justice, which can only be meted out by the army council. "If you are to die here, it must be by both a soldier's gun and hand: Your own."[8] This suggests that a self-killing would be an act of justice. Odysseus attempts to force Ajax's finger to squeeze the trigger but Ajax grabs the gun and Odysseus' hand, saying he wants

[6] Ibid.
[7] Teevan 2005: 35.
[8] Ibid. 36.

to die at the hands of an enemy, and pushes Odysseus' finger instead. Dying, he says: "Minister, my blood is now upon your hands."[9]

We are left to infer motives from actions, since Teevan does not give us any speeches such as Ajax speaks to the chorus and Tecmessa and addresses in apostrophe. Yet we have a close approximation of the Sophoclean Ajax: trapped, isolated from his peers by both politics and self-incriminating behaviour, unable to live in the new world of political expediency and preferring to end his life but at the last wishing to wreak revenge. He would know that none of it could matter at the end and that he could expect no 'justice', but perhaps he hoped to affect Odysseus' conscience. In any event, that ending has satisfaction for *him*, much as the tribute paid by Tecmessa to the dead Ajax at 966-8, regardless of the fact that Odysseus simply dismantles the gun, disposes of it and buries the body after paying tribute to the courage of the dead man. Ajax is erased, his previously perceived heroic deeds now crimes.

This is a subtle re-working of the *Ajax* – the suicide intent is left ambiguous till the end, the rage is against the commanders turned politicians who have betrayed the common soldiers, the revenge via suicide at the conclusion. This is not PTSD, but a self-aware and responsible agent, who, trapped by his own previous actions, seeing no way out, suffering isolation and betrayal, unable to give up the soldier's life but awakened to humanity paradoxically by grief at his slaughter of beloved horses, acts to end his life in a final act of vengeance. This Ajax retains a grandeur and stature befitting his ancient forebear.

8.1.2 The madness of *Ajax* in Sean Graney's *Sophocles: Seven Sicknesses* and Theodoros Terzopoulos' *Ajax the Madness*

[9] Ibid. 37.

Sophocles: Seven Sicknesses is a mashup of all seven extant Sophocles plays, its action taking place in a hospital (hence the title) and is adapted and directed by Sean Graney. It was performed in 2011 by the avantgarde group The Hypocrites at The Chopin Theater, Chicago. The Ajax portion, truncated to the madness followed immediately by the suicide, is described by George Kovacs:

> …the madness of Ajax, ... is simply incredible theater. The madness is totally immersive, both for the warrior and for us. The 'sheep' are the warriors at Troy, a dozen of them, with sheep's heads and ears. When they kneel they are sheep, when they stand they are warriors (taunting Ajax with bleating voices as he [re]lives the moment of judgment), but always they are both. Ajax slays them repeatedly, as they stand, as they kneel, in several sequences of martial arts fighting, underscored by aggressive, colored lighting and music tracks culled from a variety of films. The repeated sequences are necessary: no matter how many times Ajax kills them, the sheep keep getting back up to bleat and taunt. When it is finally over, Ajax stands over a dozen corpses (completely filling the narrow playing space) and over Tecmessa, whom he has accidently stabbed, fatally as it will turn out, when she tried to calm him. When he realizes the extent of his shame, Ajax commits suicide, propping his sword not in the earth but in the dead hands of Tecmessa.[10]

Here the madness is equated to paranoia and nightmare visions, while Theodoros Terzopoulos of Greece's Attis Theatre's *AJAX, the Madness,* performed in Philadelphia in 2013, achieved a different effect by using three actors to act out the description of the slaughter, the satiric and comic elements, but all in ritualized stylized movements. Terzopoulos explained his vision in an interview: "Madness is the core of *Ajax* …I am mainly interested in the kernel condition, the state, than in the personae of each tragedy."[11] All other incidents are omitted, to focus on the "paranoia of war and the addiction to unnecessary violence" in this "particular incident [that] undermines the notion of the war

[10] Kovacs 2012.
[11] Fringe Arts 2013.

hero and depicts a bloodstained hero."[12] The interpretation was well received, with one reviewer saying, "Without the context of the Homeric legend or the Sophoclean play, Ajax's demented fury is merely a descent into savagery… Of course, Ajax thinks he is killing his enemies, not anybody or anything…Terzopoulos's point is that at the moment of action, all that one sees is a target, and all that one experiences is the atavistic satisfaction of killing, of wading in gore. This deep pleasure is the essence of war, and the unacknowledged reason why we wage it."[13] This links up with the lust for war, and its enjoyment discussed at the end of Chapter Six,[14] an interpretation of the *Ajax* going beyond PTSD into choice and pleasure, into atrocities and moral injury, the need for rules of war and the protection of non-combatants and communities.

8.1.3 The Female Combatant as Ajax: Ellen McLaughlin's *Ajax in Iraq* 2011

Ellen McLaughlin is an actor and playwright who has previously adapted *Persians, Helen* and composed a free adaptation of *Iphigeneia at Aulis* together with *Electra* called *Iphigeneia and Other Daughters.* She never wanted to adapt the *Ajax*, finding abhorrent the torture of the animals in the opening scene of the play. However, when tasking herself to write about the U.S. military presence in Iraq, she found herself returning to the Sophoclean figure. Her play itself had its genesis in the collaboration of the class of 2009 at the American Repertory Theater and Moscow Art Theater School program at the Institute for Advanced Theater Training. Compiling materials and interviews conducted by students, certain trends stood out: the psychological toll on and increasing rates of suicide among service personnel, and sexual abuse and rape of female soldiers, and confusion between combatants and civilians in the specific conditions of Iraq, conditions that exacerbated risks arising from lack of equipment and faulty intelligence. These

[12] Ibid.
[13] Zaller 2013.
[14] Broyles 2014.

themes led her to *Ajax* but she eschewed making a version with a female Ajax and a straightforward version of the ancient play. Instead she "decided to combine two equally weighted, intertwining narratives, classic and modern, each enriching the other [with]…the shimmer of the female-male, modern-ancient, vernacular-poetic double resonance of the tragedy when the two streams were braided together in counterpoint."[15]

Performed at Flamboyan Theatre in New York City, by Flux Theatre Ensemble and subsequently in Los Angeles, the ancient male Ajax's and modern female's (she's called A.J.) stories intertwine. The latter has been subject to rape by her commanding officer, and after one particular violent rape following an act of bravery, she goes mad and kills a flock of sheep. Both protagonists are united in shame and share a monologue at the end, before ending their lives. Greek elements such as Athena are kept: her Athena presides over both the classic and modern streams and addresses the audience directly. For McLaughlin, Athena is the goddess of mind, and its loss, that is, of madness, and like Wertenbaker's Athena, she pulls the strings: "The more we explored PTSD and the more I studied the Sophocles play – in which Athena is a terrifyingly capricious force – the more it seemed right that she should frame the material."[16]

This mash-up of ancient and modern dramatised insights into trauma in general and made direct comparisons between the ancient male and the modern female experience of the battlefield, with suicide as the outcome of untreated trauma in both. This intertwining of stories appeared to work better than the female Ajax in the staged reading by Theater of War, discussed in Chapter Six, which disappointed the audience of female soldiers precisely because it failed to address issues specific to the female experience. In McLaughlin's vision, the trajectories of both stories meshed and played out with pathos.

[15] McLaughlin 2014: 836.
[16] Ibid. 838.

However the production's overly didactic nature was seen as a misfire: perhaps the mass of material collected was felt too valuable to be omitted but overloaded the play.

Accordingly, the reviews of the show put on in New York, and later in Los Angeles, were mixed. Anita Gates, in a review in the New York Times titled 'The Insanity of War is Not Ancient Myth', praised it for "preach[ing], calmly. And it tells parallel stories: of a tragic Trojan War figure and a brave young soldier in the Iraq war whose tragedy is just as ruinous."[17] Helen Shaw in a *Time Out* review titled 'An ancient Greek tragedy is retooled for modern warfare', commended Ellen McLaughlin for most of the time succeeding in keeping "two unwieldy powers in balance: ancient Greek drama and testimonial realism about the U.S. occupation in Iraq…McLaughlin…uses classical scope to prevent the audience from throwing up barriers against the soldiers' suffering. She also cracks open Sophocles' *Ajax,* a rarely performed portrait of berserk battle rage, by plundering it for its protodiagnosis of PTSD."[18]

But Shaw found other elements wanting: the multiplication of characters, and direct speech to the audience, causing information overload and too many "instructive parallels. There are ill-fitting interjections—the post-Victorian Gertrude Bell explains the Mesopotamian mess, and there is a hymn to Kali—and overreliance on direct address is definitely the piece's Achilles' heel." For others, the parallel stories failed to work: "rather than building on and informing each other, the two stories get in each other's way, derailing momentum and leaving us with little insight beyond war is very bad" from "the play's avalanche of disparate characters and speeches."[19]

[17] Gates 2011.
[18] Shaw 2011.
[19] Johnson 2011.

In the 2014 revival in Los Angeles, reviewers praised individual actors, including Aaron Hendry as Ajax, for their characterizations: "Hendry is a physical force on stage, as comfortable with sword fighting scenes as he is with soliloquies..."[20] Even though the production was overly long, with too many direct testimonials and dance scenes that felt tacked-on, it exceled "with its insight into character, its crafty use of archetypes and its non-pedagogic approach to hot-button issues like rape, suicide and PTSD", succeeding as "art as public service"[21]. The most negative review, by Jason Rohrer in *Theater-Los Angeles*, called 'Theatrical Anthrax' decried this same use of art as social service, calling the play "both self-referential and self-congratulatory", with too many over-earnest lectures addressed to the audience, and thus overly didactic ("in order to educate and provoke his audience, Sophocles didn't just stand and lecture.")[22] Too many themes, from the scandal of unhoused veterans and PTSD to sexual abuse in the forces, vie for attention, none of which can make an impact "because they crowd each other into white noise."[23]

8.2 Summation

In Chapter One I argue that the emotionalism of the Greek tragic theatre promoted the exploration of emotional states and their expression in poetic forms to move audiences viscerally. Sophocles excelled in this and showed a deep interest in typical psychological and emotional states affecting the suicidal person, and in creating profoundly moving portrayals of empathy. In Chapter Two, in a study of the pre-Sophoclean sources, I propose that Sophocles innovated the enmity of Athena and the attack on the commanders. In Chapter Three I demonstrated that the crisis of the embattled hero in the *Ajax* can be mapped onto contemporary research findings in Suicidological practice and

[20] Riefe 2014.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Rohrer 2014.

[23] Ibid.

therapy with surprising accuracy. Loss, bereavement, failure or other crisis may trigger emotional and psychological states – self-blame and guilt, hopelessness and helplessness, isolation and abandonment, sense of being trapped, loss of self or meaning – that may lead to suicide. These states received poetic expression through the emotionalism of Greek tragic modes and are skilfully portrayed and dramatized by Sophocles. In Chapter Four, I trace how aspects of this emotionalism continued to appeal to readers and audiences after the fifth-century Athenian historical context had elapsed, with emotionalism stressed in performances and adapted into the genres of sung tragedy and pantomime, while scholars excerpted the play for educational, epigrammatic and rhetorical purposes. The ability to empathize with emotional and psychological states enable readers and spectators to see themselves in the characters and situations on the page and stage and this contributes to the appeal of the ancient stories across time.

Reverting to my research sub-questions, the first was: what are the implications of this investigation for the understanding of suicide in antiquity? Attitudes to suicide began to change from the end of the fifth century and become more critical. This hardened into the condemnation and prohibition of suicide in the Christian era, which only in recent times have softened into greater compassion and understanding. Critical attitudes still continue, though taboos continue to be confronted and more information is becoming available. However, as discussed in Chapter Three, the medical model of suicide in terms of mental disorders to be treated pharmaceutically is unduly restrictive and these pharmaceutical treatments do not always work in any case.

My other research sub-question related to the performance implications of this understanding of suicide. Given the unparalleled intensity of the focus on suicide within Ajax's tragedy, what are other ways in which this Sophoclean work has been interpreted and performed, why and for what purposes?

With greater awareness today of the causes and possible treatments of suicide, a suicide is almost automatically called a "tragedy" without reference to the ancient Greek model or precise definitions of tragedy but referring more generally to the waste of potential, a lonely death, mental agony and the sufferings of the bereaved. Yet suicide appears often in tragic drama: Shakespeare, the Jacobean playwrights, Ibsen, Chekhov and Strindberg all use suicides to great dramatic effect. Suicide as a dramatic motif is full of pathos, of loss and suffering, and therefore inherently tragic both within the ancient Greek tragic tradition, as assessed both by the Aristotelian criterion of the evocation of pity and fear, and within our everyday understanding of the tragic. The art lies in the creation of the form that makes sense of and articulates the pain and suffering. As Eagleton put it: "Tragic art involves the plotting of suffering, not simply a raw kind of pain."[24]

Returning for a moment to the fifth-century context, the development and flowering of tragedy is traced to the development of the *polis*, and by Jean-Pierre Vernant to the development of tragedy as a genre. "In the new framework of tragic interplay [between chorus and protagonist], the hero has ceased to be a model. He has become, both for himself and for others, a problem."[25] Human and divine are still intertwined during this period. "The tragic consciousness of responsibility appears when the human and divine levels are sufficiently distinct for them to be opposed while still appearing to be inseparable. The tragic sense of responsibility emerges when human action becomes the object of reflection and debate while still not being regarded as sufficiently autonomous to be fully self-sufficient. The particular domain of tragedy lies in this border zone where human actions hinge on divine powers and where their true meaning, unsuspected by even those who initiated them and take responsibility for them, is only

[24] Eagleton 2003: 63
[25] Vernant 1972, 1981: 25 in 'The Historical Moment of Tragedy in Greece'

revealed when it becomes a part of an order that is beyond man and escapes him."[26] This interpenetration of human and divine worlds create issues of agency and responsibility.

For Vernant, tragedy comprised an original literary genre in which a specific tragic consciousness is born and in which tragic thought, the tragic world, and tragic man are created.[27] Tragic man is the subject of inquiry as an incomprehensible being, a *deinos.* Questions are posed but they remain open because "the tragic consciousness can find no fully satisfactory answers".[28]

Questions of agency and responsibility continue to be contested in tragedy, making it is the most philosophical of art forms. In Chapter Five, I discussed in detail Sellars' 1986 production. In the thirty-two years since, how have the themes of Sellars' Ajax fared? In my view, that performance remains even more insistently contemporary and prescient in its treatment of racism, sexism, violence and militarism in its specifically American context. That production's dramatic devices (including a deaf protagonist, a glass box imprisoning the protagonist at the start, a leader estranged both from his men and from his spiritual conscience represented by Athena) deepened and rendered inevitable the suicide crisis. At the same time the production interrogated the myth of the American warrior, and attributed responsibility equally to protagonist, the commanders and the structures of power represented by the Pentagon. Agency belonged to Ajax and every other character on stage, from his men who refuse Ajax's directive to revolt (and thus expand the role of the chorus in Sophocles), to Tecmessa's despair that her ethnicity is the cause of her husband's failure to rise in the forces, to the commanders seeking to gain from the deeds and death of Ajax. Most of all, by framing the action as a trial, the audience is required to participate as judges, to critically assess the actions and motivations, and assume responsibility for their decisions.

[26] Ibid. 27.
[27] Vernant 1972, 1981: 31 in 'Tensions and Ambiguities in Greek Tragedy'.
[28] Ibid. 33.

The performances discussed in Chapters Six and Seven take a different turn, shoehorning the *Ajax* of Sophocles into the model of reactive depression and PTSD. The excerpts read in staged readings of Chapter Six may be helpful to servicemen and women suffering from PTSD, but an insistence on framing the play in this manner limits the discussion of suicide to that of war trauma. In addition, while the readings do not by any means let off the generals and commanders from responsibility, the structure of the readings fail both to open up the play in its entirety and to promote a multiplicity of meanings, unlike the Sellars' production, and Sophocles' original.

Chapter Seven's discussion of Wertenbaker's *Our Ajax* also demonstrates why an Ajax suffering from PTSD fails to work, both dramatically and psychologically. This returns us to questions of agency, and the fraught issues of morality that continue to bedevil PTSD. In both Chapters Six and Seven, I argue that the psychological impact of modern warfare may be much more dependent on the socio-cultural-technological context than trans-historical in nature. This stands in contrast to the psychological realities of the suicidal crisis, which have a greater claim to remaining the same transhistorically.

In the other adaptations discussed in this Chapter Eight, Colin Teevan's *Missing Persons'* monologue of *The One Within* re-works and extends Sophocles in psychologically perceptive and powerful ways, while Ellen McLaughlin partially succeeds in drawing out the parallels of the male and female experience. Sean Graney and Theodoros Terzopoulos focus on the madness, transforming it variously, the former depicting paranoia, the latter the visceral satisfactions of slaughter in war, both of which leads back to the discussions of moral injury and the true costs of war on combatants and non-combatants alike.

In summary, the suicide motif within the play has been interpreted within the particular cultural contexts of the various periods, as heroic self-sufficiency in antiquity, in terms of madness and impiety in the early modern period, and in war trauma currently,

even though its psychological realism and emotional acuity deserve a wider understanding and application.

8.3 Supporting the Suicidal: Euripides' *Heracles*

In closing, I propose that the *Ajax* be read with Euripides' *Heracles* for deeper understanding into the suicidal crisis while keeping in mind what is helpful as set out in Chapter Three at page 131:

- Since the suicidal crisis is transient and temporary, blocking the exits, removing the means and staying with the affected person through this period is vital
- Exhorting the person not to think or feel as they do, to suppress the thoughts and feelings, increases the risk while reminding them of loved ones either does not penetrate the emotional and cognitive fog or feeds into the perception that since they are a burden, their loved ones will be better off by their death
- Providing a human connection through empathy, warmth, non-judgmental acceptance, a form of hope transfusion through the presence of caring others
- Engaging them in understanding their inner lives and dilemmas within a supportive relationship.

Euripides is as much a master of emotionalism in theatre as Sophocles, as demonstrated in the messenger's speech describing the slaughter of the children and Megara in *Heracles Mainomenos*. Heracles' awakening is full of pathos and the trigger to lamentation (1063-4). The subsequent 'therapy scene' between Heracles and Amphitryon re-establishes the former's sanity. The culpability established:

> σὺ καὶ σὰ τόξα καὶ θεῶν ὃς αἴτιος.
> You and your arrows and whatever god is responsible.[29]

Heracles asks, rhetorically, why he does not end his life:

> οἴμοι· τί δῆτα φείδομαι ψυχῆς ἐμῆς

[29] Loeb edition Edited and translated by David Kovacs.

τῶν φιλτάτων μοι γενόμενος παίδων φονεύς;
οὐκ εἶμι πέτρας λισσάδος πρὸς ἅλματα
ἢ φάσγανον πρὸς ἦπαρ ἐξακοντίσας
τέκνοις δικαστὴς αἵματος γενήσομαι,
ἢ σάρκα τὴν πατρῷον ἐμπρήσας πυρὶ
δύσκλειαν ἣ μένει μ᾽ ἀπώσομαι βίου;
ἀλλ᾽ ἐμποδών μοι θανασίμων βουλευμάτων 1146-53

Woe is me! Why then do I spare my life when I have become the murderer of my dear children? Shall I not go and leap from a sheer cliff or stab myself with my sword and thus give my children justice for their murder? Shall I not burn their father's flesh with fire and thrust from myself the ignominy that awaits me in my life?

On Theseus' arrival, Heracles mantles his head, afraid of polluting his friend (1160-3). After Amphitryon has sung the events leading up to the slaughter, Theseus says:

Ἥρας ὅδ᾽ ἀγών· τίς δ᾽ ὅδ᾽ οὐν νεκροῖς, γέρον; 1189
This is Hera's work. But who is this lying among the corpses?

Asked why his head is covered, Theseus is warned of pollution, but declares he has come to share his friend's grief. When Heracles repeats the warning, Theseus declares that friends are exempt from pollution:

φεῦγ᾽, ὦ ταλαίπωρ᾽, ἀνόσιον μίασμ᾽ ἐμόν. 1233
Flee, poor man, from this unholy taint of mine!
οὐδεὶς ἀλάστωρ τοῖς φίλοις ἐκ τῶν φίλων. 1234
No spirit of divine vengeance attacks a friend because of those he befriends.

In the succeeding *stichomythia,* Theseus demonstrates empathy for his friend's situation, unflinchingly agreeing with his wretchedness:

ἅπτῃ κάτωθεν οὐρανοῦ δυσπραξίᾳ. 1240

In your misfortune you reach from earth all the way to heaven.

Even though it prompts the following:

τοιγὰρ παρεσκευάσμεθ᾽ ὥστε κατθανεῖν. 1241

And therefore I have prepared myself to die.

Exhorted by Theseus not to think like an ordinary person Heracles takes Theseus to task for gratuitous advice:

σὺ δ᾽ ἐκτὸς ὢν γε συμφορᾶς με νουθετεῖς. 1249
You give me advice, untouched by grief yourself.

Reminded that he is the all-enduring, the great benefactor of mankind, Heracles expresses in 1255-1310 deep disillusionment with a world and gods who have failed him, ending:

τί δῆτά με ζῆν δεῖ; τί κέρδος ἕξομεν
βίον γ᾽ ἀχρεῖον ἀνόσιον κεκτημένοι; 1301-2
Why then should I live? What advantage shall I have if I possess an accursed and useless life?

Theseus' offer of a place in Athens and cleansing from pollution turns the scales and convinces Heracles not to kill himself. Taking leave of his dead children and wife and aged father, he ponders whether to take his weapons, which will be reminders of his terrible deeds but then decides to keep them for that very purpose:

οὐ λειπτέον τάδ᾽, ἀθλίως δὲ σωστέον. 1385
I must not let them go but must in misery keep them.

The final exchanges between Heracles and Theseus are immensely moving, and echo Neoptolemus and Philoctetes:

ἀνίστασ᾽, ὦ δύστηνε· δακρύων ἅλις. 1394
Get up, unhappy man: enough of weeping!
οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην· ἄρθρα γὰρ πέπηγέ μου.
I cannot: my joints are frozen fast.
καὶ τοὺς σθένοντας γὰρ καθαιροῦσιν τύχαι.
Yes, for even the mighty are brought low by misfortune.
φεῦ·αὐτοῦ γενοίμην πέτρος ἀμνήμων κακῶν.
Ah! How I wish I might here and now become a rock, insensible of calamity!
παῦσαι· δίδου δὲ χεῖρ᾽ ὑπηρέτῃ φίλῳ.
No more! Give your hand to your friend who would serve you.
ἀλλ᾽ αἷμα μὴ σοῖς ἐξομόρξωμαι πέπλοις.
But let me not wipe blood off upon your garments.
ἔκμασσε, φείδου μηδέν· οὐκ ἀναίνομαι. 1400
Wipe it off, do not spare me! I feel no disgust.

The exchange at 1399-1400, with Theseus inviting Heracles to wipe the pollution off on him, even offering to share the state of pollution with him, demonstrates the saving possibilities of friendship, the patient witnessing of and sharing of pain and misfortune that act as an injection of hope and strength when all feels lost. But the next exchanges also demonstrate a further truth:

παίδων στερηθεὶς παῖδ᾽ ὅπως ἔχω σ᾽ ἐμόν.
Having lost my sons, I regard you as my son.
δίδου δέρῃ σὴν χεῖρ᾽, ὁδηγήσω δ᾽ ἐγώ.
Put your arm about my neck and I shall lead the way.
ζεῦγός γε φίλιον· ἄτερος δὲ δυστυχής.
Two friends in harness, one of them in ruin. 1401-3

εἴ σ᾽ ὄψεταί τις θῆλυν ὄντ᾽ οὐκ αἰνέσει.
If someone sees you being womanish, he will disapprove.
ζῶ σοι ταπεινός; ἀλλὰ πρόσθεν οὐ δοκῶ.
Is my life a lowly one in your eyes? It was not so before, I think.
ἄγαν γ᾽· ὁ κλεινὸς Ἡρακλῆς οὐκ εἶ νοσῶν.
Lowly indeed. In your trouble you are not the famous Heracles.
σὺ ποῖος ἦσθα νέρθεν ἐν κακοῖσιν ὤν;
And what was your behavior when you were in trouble in the Underworld?
ὡς ἐς τὸ λῆμα παντὸς ἦν ἥσσων ἀνήρ.
In pride I was every man's inferior.
πῶς οὖν †ἔτ᾽ εἴπῃς† ὅτι συνέσταλμαι κακοῖς;
How then can you say that I am humbled by misfortune?
πρόβαινε.
March on! 1412-18

Theseus attempts to provoke Heracles into behaving in a more 'manly' fashion, but Heracles gets him to admit that he himself suffered in like fashion while trapped in Hades: a necessary reminder to empathise with the suffering.

Greek tragedy worked and re-worked the tragic myths in the collective memory, but certain outcomes seem to have been fixed, especially where the origins of a hero cult were concerned: Heracles goes to his death on Mount Oeta, Ajax kills himself. But the playwright could manipulate the details and create human and humane portraits of these protagonists. We know that other versions of Heracles' maddened slaughter place it before the labours, making the latter the punishment that redeems the crime. Euripides places the murders after the labours, thereby rendering the rescue by Theseus all the more radical and extraordinary.

Kathleen Riley ends her study of the performance and reception of the *Heracles* by expressing her "hope that in the next phase of its theatrical reception we might witness a direct engagement with the radical second half of Euripides' play, leading to a persuasive modern rendering of the transcendent human nobility and fellowship at its

heart."[30] Could an Ajax have been comforted and rallied by Teucer acting as Theseus above? Perhaps, but it would have pushed the play in a different direction: what we have is still a perceptive and sensitive portrayal by Sophocles of the suicidal mind which ends in suicide.

[30] Riley 2008: 357.

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